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**COMBAT
COMMAND**™
**IN THE WORLD OF
ROGER
ZELAZNY'S
NINE PRINCES
IN AMBER**

**THE BLACK
ROAD WAR**
NEIL RANDALL

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ROGER ZELAZNY



ACE BOOKS. NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

by Roger Zelazny

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THE BLACK ROAD WAR

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This seems a good place to talk about the characters in the Amber series and their evolving relationships, since a number of them put in appearances in this book. I am often asked about the order of their birth and their parentage—matters capable of causing considerable confusion.

There are all manner of apocryphal stories with respect to the founding of Amber as an offshoot of the Courts of Chaos, and the descent of its ruling family from Dworkin of Chaos and the sacred Unicorn. The extent to which this genealogical statement describes an authentic event is unclear, in that Dworkin was insane for many years and the Unicorn isn't talking. Whatever the situation, Oberon, the immortal King of Amber, was referred to as "son of Dworkin" and also as "son of Unicorn."

Over the centuries Oberon married many times and also had many mistresses as well as numerous passing liaisons, leading to a large number of offspring as long-lived as himself. It has been speculated by Court philosophers that Henry of Navarre was an Earth-shadow of Oberon, and that the Court itself may well have cast particularly strong shadows into Merovingian times. (Consider Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*.)

At any rate, there is a section in the third Amber novel, *Sign of the Unicorn*, where Oberon in his disguise as Ganelon asks Corwin to explain the succession, hoping better to understand his children's obviously conflicting feelings on the matter. Corwin says:

". . . Benedict is the eldest. His mother was Cymnea. She bore Dad two other sons, also—Osric and Finndo. Then—how does one put these things—Faiella bore Eric. After that, Dad found some defect in his marriage with Cymnea and had it dissolved—*ab initio*, as they would say in my old shadow—from the beginning. Neat trick, that. But he was the king."

"Didn't that make all of them illegitimate?"

"Well, it left their status less certain. Osric and Finndo were more than a little irritated, as I understand it, but they died shortly thereafter. Benedict was either less irritated or more politic about the entire affair. He never raised a fuss. Dad then married Faiella."

"And that made Eric legitimate?"

"It would have, if he had acknowledged Eric as his son. He treated him as if he were, but he never did anything formal in that regard. It involved the smoothing-over process with Cymnea's family, which had become a bit stronger around that time."

"Still, if he treated him as his own . . ."

"Ah! But he later *did* acknowledge Llewella formally. She was born out of wedlock, but he decided to recognize her, poor girl. All of Eric's supporters hated her for its effect on his status. Anyway, Faiella was later to become my mother. I was born safely in wedlock, making me the first with a clean claim on the throne. Talk to one of the others and you may get a different line of reasoning, but those are the facts it will have to be based on. . . ."

"Who is next? That is to say, if anything were to happen to you?"

I shook my head.

"It gets even more complicated there, now. Caine would have been next. With him dead, I see it as swinging over

to Clarissa's brood—the redheads. Bleys would have followed, then Brand."

"Clarissa? What became of your mother?"

"She died in childbirth. Deirdre was the child. Dad did not remarry for many years after Mother's death. When he did, it was a redheaded wench from a far southern shadow. I never liked her. He began feeling the same way after a time and started fooling around again. They had one reconciliation after Llewella's birth in Rebma, and Brand was the result. When they were finally divorced, he recognized Llewella to spite Clarissa. At least, that is what I think happened."

"So you are not counting the ladies in the succession?"

There follows a somewhat sexist negative remark (as he was not getting along well with all of his sisters at that point), then he works it out the rest of the way:

"... Fiona would precede Bleys and Llewella would follow him. After Clarissa's crowd, it would swing over to Julian, Gerard, and Random, in that order. Excuse me—count Flora before Julian. The marriage data is even more involved, but no one will dispute the final order. Let it go at that."

This has caused some confusion because in the fourth chapter of the first book—*Nine Princes in Amber*—Corwin had said of Random, as they were driving back to Amber, "... I realized, with that, that we shared common parents, which I suddenly knew was not the case with me and Eric. ..." Well, it was too the case with him and Eric, and it wasn't the case with him and Random. Merlin had every right to wonder as he did (in *Sign of Chaos*) just how edited—either intentionally or unconsciously—his father's tale might have been. I personally feel that because Corwin was still suffering from considerable amnesia and trauma at that point, he indulged in some wishful thinking and actually believed it to be the case; i.e., he felt closer then to Random, who was helping him, and would rather

be a half brother than a full brother to Eric, whom he disliked.

Here is the proper listing of parents for various of the Amberites, and a few observations concerning the relationships. As I will explain shortly, however, it cannot be regarded as representing a proper chronological order:

| Mother | Offspring |
|---|---------------------------|
| Moins | Llewella |
| Rilga (aged more rapidly than many; retired to a Shrine of the Uni- corn and spent her final years as something of a recluse) | Caine Julian Gerard |
| Paulette (high-strung; a suicide; possi- bly from our shadow Earth) | Random Mirelle |
| Dybele (died in childbirth) | Flora |
| Lora (Oberon married her in another shadow while Rilga was still living at her shrine; different timestream, though; tricky to date) | Sand Delwin |
| Kinta | Coral |
| Deela the Desacatrix (died leading her troops in battle) | Dalt |
| Harla (didn't work out, and they sep- arated by mutual consent; no record of divorce or annulment; no record of marriage either, peculiar, as Oberon did for a time refer to her as his wife) | None known |

Questions of sequence do arise with respect to various Shadow-paradoxes, to which Merlin refers later in the series

when thinking upon the ease with which interpretations of birth precedence could be challenged. This has mainly to do with the fact that some of the Amberites were born in shadows possessed of radically different time streams.

For the Amber board game, due out in mid-1988, I was asked to provide a list of colors and of the several devices so far referred to as associated with many of the Amberites. These follow:

| | |
|----------|---|
| Random | Orange, red, brown |
| Julian | White and black (Tree) |
| Caine | Black and green |
| Eric | Black and red |
| Benedict | Orange, yellow, brown |
| Corwin | Black and silver (Silver rose) |
| Gerard | Blue and gray (Bronze three-masted ship) |
| Bleys | Red and orange |
| Brand | Green |
| Rinaldo | Green (Phoenix) |
| Merlin | Gray and purple |
| Flora | Green and gray |
| Deirdre | Black and silver |
| Llewella | Gray, green, lavender |
| Fiona | Green, lavender, purple |
| Sand | Pale tan and dark brown |
| Delwin | Brown and black |
| Mirelle | Red and yellow |
| Dalt | Black and green (Lion rending Unicorn) |
| Osric | Silver and red |
| Finndo | Green and gold |

That provides something of a glimpse into the Family Album of Amber. Try now this variation where you get to flip through pages in your own order, letting the shadows fall where they may.

—Roger Zelazny

INTRODUCTION

by Bill Fawcett

You are in command, the King of Amber. With a blare of trumpets accented by a hurriedly barked order, it's off to battle. Riding behind are your lancers, trained warriors, whose lives depend upon the decisions you are about to make as you fight your way down the Black Road towards the Courts of Chaos.

Combat Command books provide more than just another chance to read an exciting military adventure featuring Random and the Royal Lancers of Castle Amber. You could simply "read" this book, tracing a route through the sections, but these books are also a "game" which lets you make the command decisions. This book is divided into sections rather than chapters. In each section of this game/book a military situation is described. Your choices actually write the book, the story and the ending both being determined by the combat decisions you make.

A careful effort has been made to make these adventures as "real" as possible. You are given the same information as you would receive in a real combat situation. At the end of each section is a number of choices for what to order next. The consequences of the action you pick are described in the following section. When you make the right decisions, you are closer to successfully completing your mission. When you make a bad decision, lancers die ... men who are not going to be available for the next battle.

FIGHTING BATTLES

This book includes a simple game system which simulates combat and other military challenges. Playing the game adds an extra dimension of enjoyment by making you a participant in the adventure. You will need two six-sided dice, a pencil, and a sheet of paper to "play" along with this adventure.

COMBAT VALUES

In this book the force you command will consist of mounted lancers. Each is assigned five values. These values provide the means of comparing the capabilities of the many different military units encountered in this book. These five values are:

Manpower

This value is the number of separate fighting parts of your force. Each unit of Manpower represents one man. Casualties are subtracted from Manpower.

Ordnance

The quality and power of the weapons used is reflected by their Ordnance Value. All members of a unit commanded will have the same Ordnance Value. In some cases you may command two or more units, each with a different Ordnance Value.

Attack Strength

This value indicates the ability of the unit to attack an opponent. It is determined by multiplying Manpower by Ordnance (Manpower x Ordnance = Attack Strength). This value can be different for every battle. It will decrease as Manpower is lost and increase if reinforcements are received.

Melee Strength

This is the hand-to-hand combat value of each member of the unit. In the case of a squad of mercenaries, it represents the martial arts skill and training of each man. In crewed units such as tanks or spaceships, it represents the fighting ability of the members of the crew and could be used in an assault on a spaceport or to defend against boarders. Melee Value replaces Ordnance Value when determining the Attack Strength of a unit in hand-to-hand combat.

Stealth

This value measures how well the members of your unit can avoid detection. It represents the individual skill of each soldier or the ECM of each spaceship. The Stealth Value for your unit will be the same for each member of the unit. You would employ Stealth to avoid detection by the enemy.

Morale

This reflects the fighting spirit of the troops you command. Success in battle may raise this value. Unpopular decisions or severe losses can lower it. If you order your unit to attempt something unusually dangerous, the outcome may be affected by their Morale level.

THE COMBAT PROCEDURE

When your unit finds itself in a combat situation, use the following procedure to determine victory or defeat.

1. Compute the Attack Strength of your unit and the opposition, (Manpower x Ordnance or Melee Value = Attack Strength),
2. Turn to the charts at the end of this section. The description of the battle will tell you which charts to use.
3. Roll two six-sided dice and total the result.

4. Find the Attack Strength of the unit at the top of the chart and the total of the dice rolled on the left-hand column of the chart. The number found where the column and row intersect is the number of casualties inflicted on the opponent by the unit you were rolling for.
5. Repeat for each side, alternating attacks.

The unit you command always fires first unless otherwise stated.

When you are told there is a combat situation, you will be given all the information needed for both your command and their opponent.

Here is an example of a complete combat:

Hammer's Slammers have come under fire from a force defending a ridge that crosses their line of advance. Alois Hammer has ordered your company of tanks to attack. Your tanks have an Ordnance Value of 8 and you have a Manpower Value of 8 tanks.

Slammers fire using Chart B.

Locals fire using Chart D with a Combat Strength of 3 and Manpower of 12 (giving them an Attack Strength of 36).

To begin, you attack first and roll two 4's for a total of 8. The current Attack Strength of your Slammers is 64 (8 x 8).

CHART B

Attack Strength Manpower

| Dice Roll | 1 | 10 | -20 | -30 | -40 | -50 | -60 | -70 | -80 | -90 | -100 | 101 | + |
|--------------|---|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---|
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | |
| 7 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | |
| 8 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | |
| 9 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | |
| 10 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | |
| 11 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |
| 12 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | |

Read down to the 60 to 70 Attack Strength column until you get to the line for a dice roll of 8. The result is four casualties inflicted on your opponents by your company.

Subtract these casualties from the opposing force before determining their Attack Strength. (Combat is not simultaneous.) After subtracting the four casualties you just inflicted on them, the enemy has a remaining Manpower Value of 8, ($12 - 4 = 8$). This gives them a remaining Attack Value of 24 ($8 \times 3 = 24$).

Roll two six-sided dice for the opposing force's attack and determine the casualties they cause your Slammer's company. Subtract these casualties from your Manpower total on the Record Sheet. In this case they caused one casualty, giving the Slammers a Manpower of 7 for the next round of combat.

This ends one "round" of combat. Repeat the process for each round. Each time a unit receives a casualty, it will

have a lower value for Attack Strength. There will be that many less men, tanks, spaceships or whatever firing.

Continue alternating fire rolls, recalculating the Attack Strength each time to account for casualties, until one side or the other has lost all of its Manpower, or special conditions (given in the text) apply. When this occurs, the battle is over.

Losses are permanent, and losses from your unit should be subtracted from their total Manpower on the Record Sheet.

SNEAKING, HIDING, AND OTHER RECKLESS ACTS

To determine if a unit is successful in any attempt relating to Stealth or Morale, roll two six-sided dice. If the total rolled is greater than the value listed for the unit, the attempt fails. If the total of the two dice is the same as or less than the current value, the attempt succeeds or the action goes undetected. For example:

Rico decides his squad of Mobile Infantry (M.I.) will try to penetrate the Bug hole unseen. M.I. have a Stealth Value of 8. A roll of 8 or less on two six-sided dice is needed to succeed. The dice are rolled and the result is a 4 and a 2 for a total of 6. They are able to avoid detection by the Bug guards.

If all of this is clear, then you are ready to turn to Section 1 and take command.

RANDOM AWARENESS LEVEL (RAL)

This is a measure of how aware King Random is of Derek's actions. It has a major role in determining Derek's success.

Derek's Guard

Men 2

Ordnance 6(10)

Stealth 2

Morale 2

Notes:

Random's Awareness Level

(RAL)

THE COMBAT CHARTS

After you have made a decision involving a battle, you will be told which chart should be used for your unit and which for the enemy. The chart used is determined by the tactical and strategic situation. Chart A is used when the unit is most effective, and Chart G when least effective. Chart A represents the effectiveness of the Sioux at Little Bighorn and Chart F, Custer. Chart G represents the equivalent of classic Zulu's with Assegai (spears) versus modern Leopard tanks. Even a very small force on Chart A can be effective, while even a large number of combatants attacking on Chart G are unlikely to have much effect.

CHART A

| Attack Strength | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---|
| | 1 | -10 | -20 | -30 | -40 | -50 | -60 | -70 | -80 | -90 | -100 | 101 | + |
| Dice Roll | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | | |
| 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | | |
| 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | | |
| 5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | | |
| 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 8 | | |
| 7 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | | |
| 8 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | | |
| 9 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 9 | | |
| 10 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | | |
| 11 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | | |
| 12 | | | 5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | | |

CHART B

| | 1 | -10 | -20 | -30 | -40 | -50 | -60 | -70 | -80 | -90 | -100 | 101 | + |
|-----------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---|
| Dice Roll | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | | |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | | |
| 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 7 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | | |
| 8 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | | |
| 9 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | | |
| 10 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | | |
| 11 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | |
| 12 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | | |

CHART C

| | 1 | -10 | -20 | -30 | -40 | -50 | -60 | -70 | -80 | -90 | -100 | 101 | + |
|-----------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---|
| Dice Roll | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 6 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | |
| 8 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | |
| 9 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | |
| 10 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | |
| 11 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |
| 12 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | |

CHART D

| | 1 | -10 | -20 | -30 | -40 | -50 | -60 | -70 | -80 | -90 | -100 | 101 | + |
|-----------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|---|
| Dice Roll | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | |
| 8 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | |
| 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 | |
| 10 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | |
| 11 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |
| 12 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |



— 1 —

We stare, all twelve of us, at the entrance to the small shop. Concealed as we are, in doorways and behind cars and trucks, we hardly need the deepening dusk to hide us further. Still, I'm glad the dark is coming. We may need it yet before we've done what we have to do.

I am sitting behind the wheel of a rust-eaten, dirty 1978 Sunbird, its once-brilliant white now covered with mud and dust. I've tuned the radio to the CBC, where some annoying violin concerto seems to be taking the entire night to complete. Drumming my fingers on the pale-blue steering wheel, I look through the window and impatiently wait for something to happen.

Outside, the smells from the old Cantonese restaurant on the corner fill the air. Running children screech and yell obscenities to each other as they pass by me. Suddenly, a gust of air brings with it the cloying odor of the nearby rubber factory, and I close the window to keep out the smell.

The air is like soup. Thick, sticky, the stuff I really hate. I think about it for a minute, then laugh at myself. Of all the nights to pick to carry this thing through, I have to choose the one most like a sauna. I've never liked hot weather. I like it even less tonight.

I switch the radio to the AM band and push the second button. The Blue Jays are in Boston tonight, and good old Fenway is rocking to the sound of Wade Boggs hammering yet another double off the Green Monster. This one scored two runs, which puts the Sox on top 3-0. And it's the eighth inning. Stupidly, because the game is far less important than the job I've come here to do, I tense up. The Jays can't afford to lose another one.

As the sky darkens, I continue to listen. The top of the ninth starts off well, with Fernandez walking and Gruber

Section 1

singling up the middle. But then Moseby, who can't seem to get anything going this season, swings wildly at ball four, and Bell pops up to second base. But up comes Barfield, who once again leads the league in home runs, and I feel my excitement begin to mount. If he can put one out of here, right over that damned wall in left field, we're right back in it. If not, we may not get another chance.

Not off Clemens.

Strike one. It's okay, Jesse, just keep a good eye. A ball. Fine, keep looking hard. Strike two. God damn! You struck out three times yesterday, Jess, don't do it again. A foul back. Okay, you're still alive. Clemens steps off the mound. Once. Twice. Ball two. More delay. Two more fouls, then ball three. Full count, Jess. Take your time.

The crowd must be on its feet, ready for the final strike. The strikeout king of the American League, up against the home-run king of the majors. I look at my hands gripping the wheel, and the knuckles are white with the tension. Sweat pours off my forehead and into my eyes. I'm ready, Jesse. Hammer that sonofabitch out of there. Clemens winds. Waits. Kicks. And . . .

'*Derek!*' The cry tears through the dusk. I whip around in my seat and see something round, black and round, coming at me through the air. Instinctively I open the car door, and in a tiny second I am lying on the sidewalk. My car shatters in the blast, and as the flames fly from it, I rise to a crouch and run towards the others.

A bomb! A goddamned bomb! I can't believe it. Nobody throws bombs in Toronto. This is a safe city, for chrissakes!

But it's happened, and I have to do something about it. Something a little more decisive than complaining how tawdry the city has become. I dart behind a garbage can that smells like dead cats, then I drop to my hands and knees and crawl over to where Brando stands, barely concealed by a drainpipe at the side of an old button factory.

"What's up?" I ask.

"I don't know," he replies, precisely as I expected. "Seems someone threw a bomb."

"Thanks," I reply. "Awfully good of you to tell me that. Care to help me remove the shrapnel?"

"Get stuffed, Derek," he says. "You asked me something and I gave you an answer. What else do you want?"

He's right, of course. My sarcasm is unwarranted. Still, sometimes Brando's stupidity is alarming. And I wonder: is it innate, or does he force the dumb act a little too hard?

Still, I apologize. "Okay, I'm sorry. But did you see what happened? Did you see *who* threw the bomb? It was at me, that's all I know, and I was watching the doorway the whole time."

"I know," Brando replies. "So were we. And the bomb didn't come from there. But it didn't come from the other side either. The passenger side of the car got hit, and that was the side closest to the door. Unless someone's invented a boomerang bomb."

I chuckle. Hell, that was almost funny. Very nearly witty. Given enough time, I may discover that Brando is human.

A tap on my shoulder. I whirl around. McManus looks down on me from his six-foot-six frame, then opens his denim jacket and pulls out a knife. I motion for him to put it away, but he simply shakes his head and spits on the sidewalk.

"Stan," I say, "we don't need a knife. We've never needed your knife. Knives don't do much against bombs." McManus smiles his crooked smile and feels the edge of the knife. It draws a drop of blood, and he is satisfied.

"Stay here," I whisper to both of them. "I'm going to find Tom and Jacques. "Watch that door." I don't wait for their answers, and I'm sure they won't give them, anyway. Both of them like to play strong and silent, and of all the members of our little group, Brando and McManus are the ones I like and trust the least. I can't believe they aren't simply stupid.

Running between buildings and behind cars and boxes, I

Section 1

finally come to where Jacques crouches under a low fire stair in a narrow alley. A doughnut store is on his left, a kids' used clothing store on his right. He does not see me, but stares instead at a small black squirrel that nibbles on the remains of a green apple. When I touch his shoulder, he leaps away from the wall and back into the alley, rising with his hand on the trigger of his gun. The squirrel, quite sensibly, disappears up the oak tree nearby.

"It's only me, Durrell," I say. "Please don't shoot me. I have enough problems this particular minute."

Smiling, Jacques hides his gun under his brown jacket. I see the sweat pouring from his arms as he closes the jacket again, then I wonder how he can stand being so hot. Still, I've never seen him without a jacket of some kind, so I don't bother asking him about it. Jacques is his own man, and that jacket is part of him.

"You've survived the explosion, I see," he says, his English flawless and elegant, even though French is his first language. I wish I knew French well enough to know if he is as perfect in that language as he is in mine. Polymaths unnerve me, especially if they know my language better than I do. Jacques certainly does.

"Yes," I say. "It was close, but I managed to get out of the car in time. I didn't notice anyone rushing to find out, though."

Jacques smiles again. "True," he says. "Of course, had we done so, you would likely have reprimanded us, even if you were dead. You tend to be a little unwavering, good leader. You know that, don't you?"

I nod. "Yes. I know that. And you're right, I would have been upset. But we're here for a reason, and we have to fulfill that. Wouldn't it have been a good idea to keep me alive?"

Jacques scratches the back of his neck with his right hand, then places his left there as well, to massage his neck. "To tell you the truth, Derek," he says, "I would guess that no one considered you in any real difficulty. You have an uncanny ability to survive. I've never even

seen you injured. There seemed no reason to be overly concerned with you this time."

"I've never had a bomb tossed at me, Monsieur Durrell. Even for a battle-hardened guy like me there are occasional first times." He shrugs and resumes his stare at the shop. "But that doesn't matter anymore, and to be honest I don't really care. I'm okay, and I've lived through worse. Did you see where the bomb came from?"

Durrell thinks for a moment, then turns to me and says, "I may be mistaken, but I think it dropped from above you. Perhaps from the tree. It most certainly did not come from the shop, or from anywhere else on that side of the street." He ponders for a second, then repeats, "Yes, the tree seems most likely. I suppose someone is still up there."

The tree! Of course. I knew the bloody thing was there, even though I took no notice of it. Awfully stupid of me, considering it offers the perfect hiding place for anyone suspecting an attack that evening. What bothers me most, though, is that we were expected at all. This operation was only planned two nights ago, and not until last night were such details as the timing in place at all. If we were expected, then one of us gave it away.

Who?

More importantly, why?

"Check it out, Jacques," I order, and Durrell nods, crouches, and disappears.

I take off my running shoe and smack it twice against the stair above my head, the signal for Tom to come to this spot. In less than a minute Tom appears, his speed belying his short, fat frame, and he stands before me neither breathing hard nor sweating. His smile is infectious, and although I had planned to be stern, I find myself smiling back and shaking my head.

"Yes, sir!" Tom mockingly snaps to attention. "Of what service might I be to you, *sir*!" He salutes, and insists on holding the salute until I reply. He is funny, but at times his humor is annoying.

"Did you see where the bomb came from?" I ask. "Jacques says it might have been tossed from the oak tree near my car. Brando and McManus have no idea, not that I expected them to. Have you spoken with any of the others since the explosion? Any information at all?"

"No," Tom replies, in his forthright manner. "To all questions. Matter of fact, I didn't even see the bomb until it exploded. I was watching someone moving in the upstairs window of the shop. The explosion came from behind me. The only thing I want to know is this: Why aren't the cops here?"

I snap my head back. That's an awfully good question. This is Toronto, after all. Police don't ignore things like explosions. They don't happen here. Never. So where are they?

"If they're not here by now," I suggest, "they can't be far away. Dammit, Tom, why do you always have to think of the bad things? We don't want them here. Not now. If they come, we can't pull this thing off." I pause, then look back at the little fat man in front of me. "What do we do now?"

Tom merely smiles. "Well, Derek," he begins, "if you want my suggestion," and he waits for me to nod, "I think we'd better strike now. Or forget about it for a week or so, until the police stop searching this area for further trouble." He stops and listens, then continues. "And if we're going to do it now, then would you please excuse me so that I can place myself back where I came from. I'd hate terribly to find the man we're looking for simply walked out the back door and went for a pizza somewhere. We sort of need him, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," I reply as a smile spreads over my face. "All right, go back where you came from and wait for the signal. We're a bit ahead of schedule, but we don't have any more time. It's now or never."

"Nice line, chief," Tom says. "Sounds like a good song title."

I pick up a half-rotten apple and throw it at him. He

scampers away just in time, and it lands in the street. From out of nowhere a small black dog appears, grabbing the apple in its teeth and scurrying out of sight. The street resumes its silence.

Tom Samuelson is the leader of this group of would-be vigilantes. I'm in charge now, of course, but only because I'm paying them and because I have some experience in military leadership. Not that I've ever really fought, having served in a Canadian army that has done no fighting since Korea, but I was an officer for five years following my years at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario; two of those years a 2nd lieutenant, two more as a full Lieutenant, and the final year as captain. Tom's training was simpler: he led a street gang in Detroit for three years. Once in Toronto, he hit the streets with a couple kids in Cabbagetown, then migrated to Chinatown for the bigger stuff. But compared to Detroit, Toronto has no street scene at all, and I've often wondered why Tom came here in the first place. The pickings are pretty good, I guess, but the action is very, very subdued. Still, when I decided to round up a gang of toughs, Tom's name was at the top of everybody's list. He's well-known here, and better than that, he's well-respected.

Tom, Jacques Durrell, Stan McManus, Marlon Thompson (nicknamed Brando), Reginald Goate (Billy, of course), Branko Verdi, Dennis Nichol (a poet, for God's sake), Allen Jonathan, Darcy McCrimmon (former hockey player), Unger P. Lowenstein (who claims to have been a lawyer), and Bartholomew Simpson (who insists on being called Simmie)—these are the people I've been working with, the men I am leading into battle, if battle it can be called. With these men, some of whom I am trusting only on Tom's testimony, I will be attempting what until now I've found impossible.

With these men I will try to conquer Amber.

Amber. That incredible, beautiful, terrifying world where Random rules as king and where Corwin the Murderer wanders free. Amber, land of the treacherous unicorn,

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world of misbegotten beauty and unrealized power. Land of order, land of oppression, land of destroyed dreams.

Amber, the land where once my father lived and breathed. Until he was murdered. The fratricide of Eric, Prince of Amber. Eric, my father.

I've read the books, all five of them. *Nine Princes in Amber*, *The Guns of Avalon*, *Sign of the Unicorn*, *The Hand of Oberon*, *The Courts of Chaos*. I've even read the other two, but they had nothing to do with my father, so I threw them away. What bothers me most is that the only point of view we have is Corwin's, and there is no doubt in my mind that Corwin is a liar.

For one thing, he begins the books without a memory. I realize that the Amber series is devoted to showing how he regains and makes use of that memory, how he reassimilates his native world, but there is no way of knowing that the memory he regains has anything to do with fact. We think it is true because he tells us, and if nothing else, Corwin is believable. His sense of ethos is astoundingly good. But there's more to truth than ethos, and there's more to history than memory. Corwin's chronicle is, in one sense at least, a history of one period of Amber's existence, and like all historians, we are forced to accept whoever's version is extant. For the history of Achilles' wrath we turn to Homer, for the history of my father's death we turn to Corwin.

Oh, I know. Corwin didn't really write *The Chronicles of Amber*, Roger Zelazny did. But I'm not sure that's true. Or, if it's true, I'm damned sure it doesn't matter. Zelazny didn't create Amber, he just took what was there already and wrote about it. In effect, he reworked Corwin's own manuscript. The book is Corwin's, and therefore the text we have is Corwin's. If there is a problem, it is in establishing truth. Corwin, as I've already said, is a liar.

Maybe "liar" is too harsh. Maybe he just doesn't remember properly. The most interesting thing about the story as Corwin presents it is that he is the one who gets to the top. How the hell can you believe a storyteller who

knows all along that he is destined for the top? Sure, he turns down the chance to be king, but it's pretty obvious he could have had the throne if he'd wanted it. Certainly Oberon thought he should, or at least so the books say. But my father's role seems passed over, my father's earnest attempts to save Amber from destruction. He died for Amber, and nobody seems to care.

That's why I'm here. I want to get to Amber. As far as I know, there's only one way to do that, unless you're from Amber in the first place. Somebody has to send me there.

That somebody, I have found out, lives above a small bookstore in downtown Toronto. What he's doing here, I'm sure I don't know. All I know is that he's my only ticket to Amber.

Inside the shop, the window reveals, two young women are looking over the racks of used hardcovers. From their appearances they seem to be university students, but that is purely a guess. The clerk, an overweight, bearded man in his late twenties, dressed in cheap polyester dress pants and a long-sleeved white shirt, watches them for a moment, then gets their attention and points to the door. For a few minutes the women ignore him and continue their browsings. My impatience grows.

Finally, after three more polite reminders by the bearded clerk, the two women pay for a few books and leave the store. They are laughing as they walk away, seemingly unused at their mischievous defiance in keeping the store open late. As they pass by me, about ten yards away, I see the bags slung over their shoulders, bulging with books. The bags bear the insignia of York University, my own alma mater.

Resisting with considerable difficulty the desire to join them and talk about York, a difficulty made even more severe by the fact that these women are not hard to look at, I turn my attention back to the shop. The clerk walks from shelf to shelf, straightening and jotting down some scribbles on a piece of paper. He returns to the cash register, opens it, removes the tape, and puts the money and the

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tape in a large envelope. Tucking the envelope under his arm, he disappears for a few minutes through a doorway in the back, then he returns to the cash register and locks it. Finally he turns out all the lights but one, locks the front door from the inside, and disappears once more through the back. A minute passes, then another. At last I see the signal, a double flash of the headlights of a car, that lets me know he has left the shop for good.

At long last I am ready to begin. Fear mixes with excitement as I start my walk towards the back of the shop. Our plan is hardly elaborate, but it doesn't have to be. Beside the back door of the shop is a door to the stairway that leads up to the apartment. My job is to knock on the door and wait for an answer. If I get one, and the person answering is the one we want, then I'll play it by ear. If there is no answer, I am to signal the others. Two of them will come forward and break down the door, and then three more will join them—and me—as we rush through and up the stairs. That will make six of us: hardly necessary, to deal with one person, but I'm counting on force to get my demands through. By myself, I might not be able to demand anything.

Of course, this all assumes resistance. It may be that our contact will do everything I want, either because he's afraid of me or because he would be willing to do it anyway. Perhaps all he wants is money. There's even a chance that he can't help me at all. I don't believe that could happen—I researched the whole thing far too long—but I suppose it's possible. If so, however, it's a possibility I don't want to think about.

The night is dark now, and the sounds of the Toronto traffic buzz through the city. About to make my move, I am suddenly wary, suddenly filled with doubt. What if this is all for nothing? What if the contact *can't* help me? What if everything goes as planned, and I actually get to Amber? Can I really do what I want to do? Can I—with only twelve men to help me—do what I have to do

to make any difference in Amber itself? Can a commando squad (for that is what we are) infiltrate to the heart of a kingdom?

Nothing is worked out, not properly. In my haste to get moving, I've overlooked almost everything that's important. Part of that is because I simply don't know what to expect. The other part is that I'm afraid to think of what might be. Worst of all, though, I haven't even told my squad—my gang, my warriors—that they might be leaving this world with me. How could I? Who would believe me?

I'm not even sure I believe myself. Suddenly, this whole thing seems so crazy.

The door is painted light blue, and the number 37 is painted on it in pink. Pausing for a moment to reflect on my prepared entrance speech, I stare at the brown mat at my feet. *Turn back, idiot!* I seem to hear my voice say, *turn back and go home.* But I've prepared well enough not to listen to my own cowardice, and so with shaking hands I reach towards the door-bell button. Pushing it, I hear a low buzzer sound in the depths of the building.

I wait.

And I wait.

And I wait a little more. Nothing. Not a sound, not a peep, not even a bang or a whimper. Nothing so strong as the pitter-patter of little feet reaches my eager ears. For a moment I consider leaving. That thought is destroyed, however, not by a noise from inside the building, but instead from one behind the building. Turning around, I see Jacques Durrell walking towards me.

"No answer, right?" he asks softly. "All of this for nothing. I can hardly believe it."

"Now come on, Jacques," I mutter, turning back to the door. "Maybe the guy's in the shower. Maybe he's gone out for some milk. Or beer. Hell, maybe he's in the can. Maybe he just doesn't answer the door after ten o'clock." All of these possibilities are real, of course, but even so, I am scarcely convinced. The truth is likely simpler: our

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man has gone to a pub, or perhaps to a movie. Suddenly I feel sick.

Jacques studies me closely. Speaking slowly, as if to force me to understand each word, he suggests, "I suppose we had best proceed with the other plan. As it is, we are wasting time." After a few minutes, he adds, "Do we have your permission, Derek?"

The other plan, as we developed it a few days ago, is to break down the door and find what we want without any help. Six of us would go upstairs, while the other six wait outside for any sign of trouble or our client's return. A perfectly reasonable alternative, I realize at once, but here, at the very door I've sought for several months, the idea seems suddenly inappropriate, suddenly less than possible. Even if I get over my dislike of breaking and entering (which I am embarrassed to admit), the fact remains that I may simply not find what I want. I think that, when all is said and done, I need our contact to provide what I've come for. I find it hard to believe that I can get to Amber by myself.

The pause has been too long. Jacques, rarely impatient, becomes so now. Shaking his head and sighing, he asks me, "Do we proceed, Derek, or do we go home? Please make up your mind. If we are not to go through with this, I have things I would like to do." He crosses his arms.

"One more minute, Jacques," I reply with a brief smile. "Just give me a few seconds. I've never done this before."

"We have," he insists. "We know how to do it." Then, much more softly, "Yes, Derek. A few more minutes. But that is all. If you have not given the signal by then, I will tell the others to leave. Please do not keep me waiting." Unnerved by his brusqueness, I return my gaze to the blue door with the pink numbers. Suddenly, without warning, the sheer silliness of my conversation with Jacques strikes me funny, and the sound of my full laughter breaks the drone of traffic in the night.

It breaks as well, almost on cue, the silence that surrounds the door. With a shatter of wood, the door swings

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open, and through it race three large men. All three have knives drawn, and all three seem to know where they are going. One dives towards Jacques, a second dashes by him into the street. The third, I hate to say, is barreling straight towards me. Purely out of fear, with reflexes born of a lifetime of running away, I tear at the knife in my pocket, hoping to get it out and in front of me. My heart pumps madly.

This is your first combat. Because the combatants are fighting either with their hands or with knives, use the Melee Value of Derek's men (6). For this combat, two of Derek's men (Derek and Jacques) will fight with an Attack Strength of 12 (6 Melee x 2 Manpower) against two enemies with a Melee Value of 4 (Attack Strength of 8). Derek's men fight on Chart B. The enemy fights on Chart D.

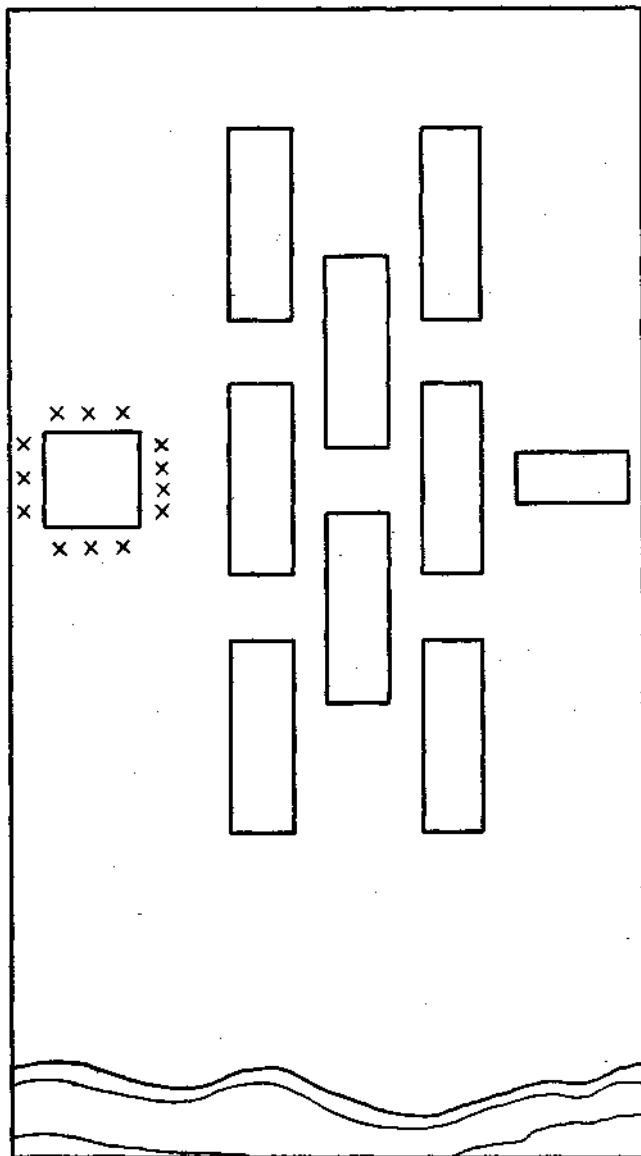
To determine who wins, roll two six-sided dice and add the results. Roll first on Chart B, to see if Derek is successful. If any enemies are still alive after the first attack, roll on Chart D to determine if they inflict losses on Derek's men. Continue this pattern until both men in one of the units have died.

If the attack calls for one loss to Derek's men, then Jacques will die.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 5.

If Derek loses, turn to Section 8.

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Turning to my comrades, I hold up my hand in an order for them to stay where they are. I'm not sure where my steps will lead me, but I see no reason to endanger them. If we become separated, I'll worry about it then, if the circular door reveals nothing, then everything is fine.

The moment I set foot onto the pattern, a shiver of energy pulses through my shoes and into my flesh. Startled, I pull my foot back, but after the surprise wears down, I begin the walk once more. This time the pulse seems stronger and, with each step, it grows stronger still. In a short while I find the pulses jolting my leg muscles, turning them spongy and difficult to control. Soon I am barely able to take a step, as my legs seem almost glued in place.

My steps are short now, and with each one I feel more of my strength drain from me. Maybe it's the pattern; maybe if I tried to figure out where the lines went, they would lead me to the center without any difficulty. Still, no matter how often I study the lines, I cannot determine anything specific. If there is truly a meaningful pattern, its meaning is lost on me.

Only a few yards away now, the center beckons with a faint blue glow. But yards are yards, and I don't know if I have the strength to walk them. On I go, each step taking longer than the last, my hands shaking and my throat gasping with the sheer effort of movement. Then suddenly I reach an impasse, a place where I realize that the next step removes my power of choice. If I take it, I will not be able to leave the pattern. If I turn back, I can still return to the others. Like most of life's important decisions, the choices are incredibly

clear. What is not clear, as always, is which way I should choose.

If Derek goes on towards the center, turn to Section 7.

If Derek chooses to return to the others, turn to Section 9.

— 3 —

I can scarcely keep my hands from trembling as I reach for the doorknob. For no explicable reason, I am afraid, of something I do not understand. Yet, even though I make decisions quickly, I do not make them mindlessly, and a decision, once made, is justification enough for action. Willing the trembling out of my fingers, I grasp the knob firmly.

Nothing. Not a hum, not a spark, not a shock, not even a tremor. Slightly embarrassed, I wonder what I was afraid of. Maybe it was the door itself that had me scared. Or maybe someone meant me to be needlessly apprehensive. Whatever the case, I am afraid no longer.

The door opens into a room that smells strongly of incense. Faint blue light reveals a mural covering all the walls, on which prance unicorns, satyrs, and other creatures of legend, all of them glowing a sharp silver. The colors on the mural change gradually as the seconds pass, cycling through to create the illusion of movement. On the floor is an oval rug, hooked in intricate swirling patterns, the patterns, too, reflecting brightly in the pale light. A tall chair rests on the rug, in the middle of the room, and its back is towards me.

Slowly it turns, and I motion for a couple of my comrades to join me. Swinging around, it reveals a leg clad in denim and the sleeve of a shirt, and when it turns farther, I see the rest of the sitter's body. Katyrina Emerson, short, thin, fascinating but not quite beautiful, looks at me with eyes fully open, a wry smile about to cross her face.

"Hi," she says. Somehow I was expecting something a little grander.

I nod. "Good evening." An uncomfortable pause follows, uncomfortable for me at least. Stupidly I add, "Don't you have a kitchen?"

She crosses her legs and swings the upper one, "No. I send out for pizza a lot. Or I go down the street for a salad. I don't eat much, and I hate cooking." Again the wry smile. "Is there anything else you'd like to know about my apartment?" I can't help but feel the absurdity of all this.

"Actually," I stammer, "yes. A little bit. I was wondering," I say in that most stupid of opening lines, "I was wondering if you could help me get somewhere. I think you might know how." I can't believe I'm handling it like this. I'd anticipated a fight, a battle, a demand to go to Amber. But not a series of polite, inept, hopeless questions. If Tom isn't laughing, he should be.

"And where would you like to go?" Katyrina asks, her tone like that of a seasoned travel agent to a couple of newlywed teenagers. She waits for a response.

"Amber," I stumble.

"Of course. Where else?" She looks at the men standing beside me. "And would you like passage for the others as well?"

I hesitate, then nod. "Sure. Can you arrange it?" Fine, I think. If this is all a trivial little game, some kind of setup (as I now begin to think it), I'll happily play along. Absurdity, though, is starting to give way to annoyance. Ms. Emerson is getting *too* cute.

"What's in it for me?" she asks, and the smile leaves her face.

My God! I think. Those eyes. Emerald green and pulsing with pent-up energy; they drill mercilessly into mine. Only with the greatest effort can I tear myself away from them. So much for the trivial little game.

"I don't know," I manage to blurt out. "What do you want?" She is silent, and I add, "I'm not even sure you

can get me to Amber. I'm not even sure you know anything about it."

Magic words, those. Katyrina jumps from the chair and shakes as she points the index finger of her right hand towards me. Obviously, I've insulted her, a fact that makes me smile my own wry smile right back at her.

"I can get you to Amber, you fool," she nearly yells. "I can get you there, and I can bring you back. Or I can get you there and leave you there. You need my help to go, and you need it again to return. Mock me even once, and you will find out what a one-way journey is like. Amber is beautiful, but you will be neither welcome nor comfortable there. Your home is here. You can't change that." The flurry of words has drained her, and she sits down again.

For a moment I stare at her, tilting my head to the right to display, quite contrary to my true feelings, how unimpressed I am with her outburst. I hold that pose for precisely the right number of seconds, enough to let my eyes work their way through her own, and then I complete the act of defiance with a quick shrug. If I have unnerved her in any way, she is hiding it well.

Nodding, I say to her, "Fine. You can get me there. But you still haven't answered my question. What do you want in return?"

"Your soul," she laughs. "Faustus-style. Do you think you can manage that?" Thoroughly pleased with herself, she sinks farther into the chair.

Stepping a little closer to her, I shake my head and smile. "Come on, Katyrina. I'm trying to be serious. I want to get to Amber, for reasons of my own. As far as I know, you're the only person who can send me there. Now, please, I want to go quickly, me and my comrades. All I want to know is what I can give you in return for whatever passage is at your command. I'll gladly pay it, if you'll agree to send us right away."

"I have asked for your soul, Derek. That is all I want." Her eyes betray no hint of mockery, no sign that she does

not mean what she is saying. Taken fully aback, I close my eyes before responding.

"What do you mean, woman? What do you mean by asking for my soul? How would I give it to you even if I wanted to?" I pause. "One more thing. How do you know my name?"

Folding her hands in her lap, she raises her eyes to the ceiling for almost a full minute. Lowering it at last, she tilts her head and stares into my eyes. "I know your name because I have been expecting you for more than a year. Someone you have never met alerted me to you, insisting that you would find me. How you did it is unimportant, although I admire your persistence. The only important thing is that you're here.

"As for my audacity in asking for your soul, it should hardly be a surprise. You're asking to leave this world, this Shadow, and go to the Shadowless world. Do you think that's an easy thing for me to grant? That it takes nothing on my part? It would be easier, I suspect, for me to get you into hell than into Amber. Satan actively recruits. Random doesn't. Nobody in Amber wants you there.

"Yes, I can get you to Amber. But to do so I must surrender two, three, maybe four years of my life. I hold life precious, especially mine. So I expect to be paid well for my services. And I can bargain your soul to many interested persons, people who can, perhaps, give back the years I lose. That's why I ask for your soul." She sits back, her eyes closed, silent for a full two minutes before speaking again. At last she opens her eyes, and they burn with the fire of need. I am frightened when she speaks again.

"Will you, Derek?" she intones. "Will you give me your soul?"

"I guess," I tremble as I try to jest, "a couple grand would be completely out of the question." As I expected, Katyrina does not respond.

How important, I now ask myself, is this whole busi-

ness? Why do I want to go to Amber? Why should I surrender my soul for a father who was nothing to me, a man who may not have even remembered I existed? To know everything I can about my father, to clear his name if I can, to discover what actually happened to him and correct whatever mistakes have been made—these are worth working for, fighting for, sacrificing my life for. But are they worth giving up my soul? About having a soul, and its importance when I die, I am completely convinced. I always have been. Not for me the futility and despair of twentieth-century existentialism, nor for me the currently fashionable obsession with the present. I believe in the spiritual, and I know the importance of the future. My soul, I have always known, is bound up tightly in both.

And now I am asked to give it away. To turn away from the future, to surrender even a partial control of my own destiny. God damn it! I would have paid a million dollars if she'd asked me to. I would have kissed her toes and licked the floor at her feet. I would have even given a pound of flesh. But my soul? Why, Katyrina, why that?

But if I don't do it, I will never know my father's story. Not knowing his, I can never know mine. He was my father. I owe him, quite literally, my life. If he has been wronged, I must do something about it. Perhaps it is worth my soul to avenge his murder. If I don't, my soul will be dead anyway.

If Derek agrees to surrender his soul to Katyrina, turn to Section 14.

If Derek refuses to surrender his soul, turn to Section 10.

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Besides, I've always preferred flashy entrances. Tom and I smirk to one another as we ready ourselves to break through the door. So far our trip has been eventful but not exciting, and we are looking forward to some real action.

Of course, we'll feel rather foolish if the door leads only to a messy kitchen, but for the sake of doing something, we are willing to take that risk.

"All right, Tom," I shout, since there is no longer need for quiet. "On three." We poise. "One," I breathe. He turns his head to the door. "Two." We bend. "Three." Together we charge, and when we hit the door, the wood around the knob splinters and breaks. The pressure snaps the hold on the hinges as well, and the door hangs in towards the room, ready for us to draw it open.

The door opens into a room that smells strongly of incense. Faint blue light reveals a mural covering all the walls, on which prance unicorns, satyrs, and other creatures of legend, all of them glowing a sharp silver. The colors on the mural change gradually as the seconds pass, cycling through to create the illusion of movement. On the floor is an oval rug, hooked in intricate swirling patterns, the patterns, too, reflecting brightly in the pale light. A tall chair rests on the rug, in the middle of the room, and as we enter the room, it swings towards me.

Katyrina Emerson, short, thin, fascinating but not quite beautiful, looks at me with fear. She springs from the chair and crosses to the door. Tom raises his hands to stop her, which she does, and then she spreads her arms in a gesture of surrender. The first words are hers.

"Don't hurt me. Please." Feebly, pleadingly, irresistibly. I resolve at that moment that we will comply with her request. "What do you want?" she asks, her initial fear beginning to subside. "Just name it, but please don't—"

"We won't hurt you, Katyrina," I interrupt. "All we want is a passage to Amber. I have reasons to think you can help us. Will you?"

"Do I have a choice?" she mutters. Her eyes are fixed on the floor.

I shake my head. "No," I answer firmly. "We have no other way of getting there."

She nods slowly and then continues, her voice now more of a command than a request, "Okay. Follow me,

then. We have to use the other room." Walking past me but keeping as much distance as possible, she enters the living room and then the hall. With a moment's hesitation, she turns the handle of the bedroom door.

Inside, a dull blue light illuminates a room with no furniture. Opposite me is a window, but thick Venetian blinds cover it completely, keeping the blue light out of sight of the street. On the walls hang tapestries of various hues and sizes, the scenes on them ranging from smoking volcanoes to knights in black armor to black clouds thick with snow.

On the floor is a series of lines and boxes, all of them connected and all of them differently colored. Katyrina begins to walk through the pattern, motioning for us to follow her. We do as she has asked, each of us marveling at the zigzagging she does, each of us wondering if the route she is taking is in any way necessary. But as we near the center of the room, I see where she is headed. Only a few feet ahead is a small circular door with a notch carved into the center. A little larger than a manhole cover, the circular door clearly leads down.

Katyrina reaches for the notch and pulls up. It opens slowly to one side and stands perpendicular to the floor. Once it is open, I peer down through the hole. Only blackness greets me.

"What's all this?" I ask. "Where does this lead?"

"To Amber," Katyrina replies. "That is where you want to go, isn't it?" To my nod, she adds, "Of course, the door leading down isn't exactly necessary, but as a piece of staging it's very effective. Do you recognize what this room is modeled after?" The smile on her face is enchanting even in my fear.

"No," I mumble. "Not at all."

"Strange," she says, almost to herself. "I'd have thought you would." Then, after a moment's hesitation, "The film version of *Dr. Faustus*. With Burton and Taylor. Do you remember it? I always thought it was very effective, so I adopted the idea."

Of course. Richard Burton as the doctor who sold his soul to the devil, about to descend into hell in payment. A man beyond all hope of redemption, a man unable to understand the enormity of the consequences of his actions. A grotesque, ugly, huge hole in the middle of the room, with Mephistopheles drawing him down into hell. All in all, one of the most frightening scenes I ever remember. Half in curiosity and half in terror, I look down into the hole.

For a full minute I see nothing. Then, suddenly, a blackness begins to roil towards me, carrying with it the horrendous stench of rotting and burning flesh. I stagger, and begin to turn away. But something is holding me, something that will not let me go, and against my will I stand rooted to my place. Up, ever up, the blackness roils on, and as it comes, my brain goes dark. As the reek of death carries me beyond consciousness, I fight for one last look into the dark. There, below me, hideous outside the realm of human acceptance, a vision of chaos swims before my eyes. Screaming, I fall inside.

Turn to Section 29.

— 5 —

Just before the charging man hits, I manage to free my knife. Dodging slightly to my left, I hold the knife towards him and watch as he bears down upon it. He sees it in time to lean away from it, but not in time to avoid it completely. Blood gushes from his right shoulder as he lunges past.

Somehow, I've managed to keep hold of the knife. I almost lost it with the impact, but I gripped it anew before it left my hand. Now I am ready, and I watch, eager to finish this fight, as my assailant turns to face me.

"Just you and me, creep," I snarl. A lousy line, I

realize, but here in the back streets of Cabbagetown, it somehow seems appropriate.

He snarls back, without bothering to say anything. He doesn't strike me, I suddenly realize, as a person who would ever have much to say. Not even if faced with death.

And that's what it becomes, quickly and without ceremony. He leaps towards me, but swerving easily, I slash another wound into his right arm. Cursing at me, and snorting like an enraged bull, he whirls and charges again. This time I make no attempt to move. Holding my knife at his charging throat, I wait for the blade to do its work. In a second it is over, and my would-be killer lies dead at my feet.

The sight of a dead man does not please me. Leaning to my left, I vomit at the knowledge that I have killed. I roll the body into the hedge and walk through the door.

I wait in the entranceway for the others to join me. The fight has been short, but by the end, all of us were in a position to strike. That level of alertness comforts me, because I know we will need all our skills should we ever get to Amber. Compared with what we might find there, fighting some amateur Toronto toughs is nothing at all.

Together once more, we climb the stairs. Leading, I come to the top and look around. In front of me is a bathroom, to my left a living room, and to my right a bedroom. I see no kitchen, but I presume one gets to it through the living room. The bedroom door is closed, but both the bathroom and the living room are open. I can see no one from where I stand.

Obviously, the living room is the more attractive place to start. It is open, and I can see most of it from where I stand. Few surprises are likely to greet me there. But the closed door lends the bedroom a special appeal. Mysterious places are more exciting than known places, if only because we have no idea what is in them.

Towards the semiknown or the unknown, then, I must choose to go.

If Derek chooses to enter the living room, turn to Section 9.

If Derek chooses to enter the bedroom, turn to Section 6.

— 6 —

Testing the bedroom door, I find that it is unlocked. Inside, a dull blue light illuminates probably the strangest scene I've ever taken in. The room has no furniture, and I can't even see the source of the light. Opposite me is a window, but thick Venetian blinds cover it completely, keeping the blue light out of sight of the street. On the walls hang tapestries of various hues and sizes, the scenes on them ranging from smoking volcanoes to knights in black armor to black clouds thick with snow.

Strangest of all, though, is the floor. Beginning where I stand, and taking up the entirety of the room, is a series of lines and boxes, all of them connected and all of them differently colored. I can't figure out any pattern, but I can easily see that a pattern in fact exists. After staring at the floor for several seconds, I begin to realize one important fact: all lines converge near the center of the pattern. There, almost imperceptible in the pale blue of the light, the pattern's center reveals a small circular door with a notch carved into the center. A little larger than a manhole cover, the circular door clearly leads down.

But where? I am forced to ask. Below us is the bookstore, the windows of which revealed nothing like this at all. If that's where the door leads, then this is the most obscure possible means of getting there. I'm all for escape hatches, but why the snazzy artwork?

Nonetheless, the door exists, and I have to decide whether

or not I want to find out where it goes. Part of me says yes, purely out of curiosity, while another part tells me to turn around and go back to the living room. Above all else, I am afraid that if I choose the door, the choice may be irrevocable. That may be good, but it is frightening as well.

If Derek chooses to return to the living room, turn to Section 9.

If Derek heads towards the center of the bedroom, turn to Section 2.

— 7 —

Onwards, then, to the center. For better or for worse.

In this case, at least, for a while it seems to be for the better. Each step becomes easier, as my legs become lighter and the pattern on the floor less confusing. Now, beyond doubt, the pattern is converging on the door in the middle. Once I reach that door, my troubles should be over.

On the door is an inscription I cannot read. In fact, I can't even figure out what language it's in. But the means of opening the door is easy enough to understand. Right in the center is a handhold, carved out of the intricately ornamented wood. All I have to do is reach down and pull the door up.

"All right, then, Derek," I mumble to myself, "this is it." A spasm of fear shakes me for a moment, but it settles and I reach for the door. It opens slowly, but it is not heavy. Hinged on its right, the door opens to that side and stands perpendicular to the floor. Once it is open, I peer down through the hole.

For a full minute I see nothing. Then, suddenly, a blackness begins to roil towards me, carrying with it the

horrendous stench of rotting and burning flesh. I stagger, and begin to turn away. But something is holding me, something that will not let me go, and against my will I stand rooted to my place. Up, ever up, the blackness roils on, and as it comes, my brain goes dark. As the reek of death carries me beyond consciousness, I fight for one last look into the dark. There, below me, hideous outside the realm of human acceptance, a vision of chaos swims before my eyes. Screaming, I fall inside.

Turn to Section 29.

— 8 —

Just as I free my knife, the charging man hits. I feel the knife fly out of my hand as I fall back and hit the ground. My head smashes against the pavement and I feel myself begin to black out. Looking up with my last ounce of energy, I see the reflection of the streetlight on my attacker's knife as it descends towards my throat.

Turn to Section 29.

— 9 —

There is more to this place than we have as yet discovered, I decide. And curiosity can be a useful tool. Through the living room door we step, all six of us. I see instantly that the room is larger than I had thought, in fact, that it occupies most of the remaining upstairs space. Two doors—pale blue like the front door—lead to other rooms (I would guess a kitchen and a closet), and windows at the front and back of the house are blocked with heavy drapes. The light in the room is not bright, but neither is it strangely colored. Everything, in fact, looks quite normal.

An old brown sofa, well-worn but with no rips in evidence, rests along the near wall immediately to my left. Against the front window is a cheap stereo system that stands atop a closed record cabinet. Along the left half of the far wall are three chairs, one a leather-covered recliner, one a match for the sofa, the other a little older and a little more worn. The right side of the room is given over to dining room and study. An old round dining table, covered with magazines and books, sits to my immediate right, and visible around it are three chairs, each with differently colored flaking paint. A fourth chair is possible, because something has to be holding up the dish towels I see draped off the far end of the table, but I have no proof of its existence. Further on to the right, beside one of the doors, a bookcase crammed with volumes of various sizes rises to the right of an old but solid oak desk. The desk holds a typewriter and many, many papers.

As the others take up various positions around the room, more for comfort than for safety, I walk past the table towards the desk. The bookcase holds dozens of books on the occult, almost as many on literary theory, and an enormous number of novels of all kinds. Predominant, though, at least on first glance, are books of fantasy, and on a quick glance I can see no significant omissions. Growing a little bolder, I leaf through the paper on the desk, looking for some clue as to the kind of person I hope to deal with. Flipping over a thick stack of papers, I see what is apparently the title page of the final draft of a Ph.D. thesis. When I read it, I smile, because the topic is anything but a surprise:

Occult Theory and the Fantasy Novel

By Katyrina Emerson

A Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree Doctor of Philosophy at York University, Toronto

Of course. It fits so well with everything. Even the bit about York University. The stuffy old University of Toronto would obviously not allow so esoteric an idea. What's also fitting is that the writer is a woman. Somehow I hadn't expected that. Maybe because the person Merlin goes to see in *Trumps of Doom* is a man. Or maybe because of my years of conditioning. But what the hell: witches are every bit as terrifying as warlocks. Perhaps more so.

But where is she? She hasn't yet shown herself, and one would think she'd be getting a little anxious. Surely the attack by her bodyguards wasn't accidental, and I have trouble believing they thought of it themselves. Still, there are some doors I haven't tried, one of which may lead to a hiding place or an open window. It's time to stop reading and start doing.

As I suspected, the first door is a closet. Large and filled with coats, boots, and boxes, it smells musty and looks dirty. I uncover nothing in a quick snoop, except to note that the boxes are all filled with papers and books. Given Katyrina's current scholastic activities, though, this is hardly a surprise.

Closing the closet, I move towards the other door. I reach for the doorknob and close my fingers on it. But just as I am about to turn it, a sudden bout of apprehension draws me back. Strange, that, since I have no concrete reason for feeling apprehensive, only the fact that my friend is nowhere in sight. But I'm fully expecting her to be in this last room, or not to be in the apartment at all, so that's not what's making me apprehensive. There's something else about the door itself—or perhaps about the room behind—that has my hands shaking with sudden fright.

"Tom," I whisper. "Come here." At my request, Tom Samuelson nods and walks towards me, looking at the door as quizzically as I have been.

"Something strange about it, Derek," he says. "I sensed that as soon as you got near it. I don't know how to describe it." Scratching the black beard that spills from his face, Tom stares at the door.

"So what do we do?" I question him softly.

After a moment's thought, during which he pulls at his beard and nods, Tom looks at me, tilts his head, and says, "Well, boss, if you don't like the feel of the doorknob, why not just *break* the door open? That way we won't have to turn the knob at all."

Despite the tension, I laugh. "But, Tom," I respond with a smile, "it's not only the door that gives me the willies. It's the room behind it as well. Doesn't that change your plan a little?"

After another silent moment, Tom replies, "I don't think so. If the door is the problem, breaking it down may well be the answer. If the problem is the room itself, at least by breaking the door down we make the first move. Unless someone in that room has been listening to our conversation, it may even take them by surprise." He smiles. "Fear and surprise, remember, are our two main weapons."

An involuntary laugh escapes me. "Okay," I agree. "Maybe you have a point. But the door makes me nervous, and I'm not sure kicking it in will help. Still, you're right about one thing. We've got to do something."

If Derek turns the doorknob, turn to Section 3.

If he chooses to break down the door, turn to Section 4.

— 10 —

Even so, no matter how much I think of my father, I cannot surrender my soul. It's too much, and I'm not even guaranteed of success. There must be another way to get to Amber, a way that doesn't require such an enormous sacrifice. I can't believe Katyrina is my only link.

Then again, maybe I can force her to send me. Surely six burly fighters can demand of a small, thin woman that she do anything we ask. Turning to Tom, I nod and point

towards Katyrina. He nods in return, disappears back into the living room, and comes back with four of our men. The other, he tells me with his eyes, is standing guard.

"No dice, Katyrina," I declare, my voice firm and unwavering. "My soul is too important to me, and there are other ways for you to make up for a few years. But I want to go to Amber anyway, and these men are going to help me. Send us now, Katyrina, or we will force you to do so. Do you understand?"

Eyes open wide in shock and (I think) fright, Katyrina jumps to her feet. "I understand," she says. "You would use force, is that it?" At my nod, she walks towards me and raises her hand in a gesture of peace. "That won't be necessary," she continues. "I will do as you wish."

Bingo! We've done it, another victory for sheer intimidation. I don't feel completely right about doing it, but it sure beats giving away my soul. We'll get to Amber, and that's the only important part. If everything goes well, I can always come back and repay Katyrina in one way or another. Maybe I'll send her on a Caribbean cruise. Hell, she's pretty good-looking, maybe I'll take her on one myself.

"Come with me," she says, and she walks out. Through the living room we march, Tom racing down the stairs to call in the others. Within a few minutes all of us are assembled outside the bedroom door, which Katyrina opens with a quick turn of the knob.

Inside, a dull blue light illuminates a room with no furniture. Opposite me is a window, but thick Venetian blinds cover it completely, keeping the blue light out of sight of the street. On the walls hang tapestries of various hues and sizes, the scenes on them ranging from smoking volcanoes to knights in black armor to black clouds filled with black rain. In the center of the room, a small circular door is carved into the floor. A little larger than a manhole cover, the door clearly leads down.

Katyrina reaches for the notch and pulls up. It opens slowly to one side and stands perpendicular to the floor.

Once it is open, I peer down through the hole. Only blackness greets me.

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"To Amber," Katyrina replies. "That is where you want to go, isn't it?" To my nod, she adds, "Of course, the door leading down isn't exactly necessary, but as a piece of staging it's very effective. Do you recognize what this room is modeled after?" The smile on her face is enchanting even in my fear.

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Of course. Richard Burton as the doctor who sold his soul to the devil, about to descend into hell in payment. A man beyond all hope of redemption, a man unable to understand the enormity of the consequences of his actions. A grotesque, ugly, huge hole in the middle of the room, with Mephistopheles drawing him down into hell. All told, one of the most frightening scenes I ever remember. Half in curiosity and half in terror, I look down into the hole.

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Turn to Section 29.

— 11 —

"Men," I command in a voice just below a shout.

"Let's go in."

Tom smiles as we rise to our feet. Without hesitation, we unsheath our swords and run at top speed across the field towards the guard. The army is too far ahead to see us, and for a moment even the guard does not notice. But finally they see us and turn to face us, their backs to the wagon that holds the things we seek.

Using the rules for combat, determine the winner of the battle. As the stats sheet shows, Derek's men have an Ordnance Value of 6. Multiply this value by the number of men in Derek's squad to determine the Attack Strength. Find this number along the top of Chart C, roll two dice, and cross-reference to find the number of guards killed by the first attack. Derek's troops attack first, then the guard attacks back. This continues until one group or the other is entirely eliminated.

The guard numbers nine men, with an Ordnance Value of 6. Their Attack Strength, therefore, is 54. They attack on chart D.

Remember that you can, at the start of any round, arm Derek's men with the guns they carry with them. If you do so, increase Derek's Ordnance Value to 10. Also, mark a "1" in the RAL section of the stats sheet.

If Derek wins—kills all the guard—turn to Section 23.

If Derek loses (all his men are killed, including himself), turn to Section 34.

—12—

The attack is on! It feels good, after so much talk, to finally get into action. I've never really been a fighter, but I'm beginning to understand those who are. There's nothing worse than sitting around.

Silently we form a line, each of us spaced about twenty feet apart, and we crawl to the crest of the hill. Looking over, we see the provost guard of the marching army, with its eyes, to a man, turned towards the front of the host. Armed with swords, spears, and knives, armored with thin leather, the guard looks ripe for the picking. Farther and farther they fall behind the rest of the army, the slow pace of the supply wagons forcing them nearly to a halt. All that's left is to order the assault itself.

I have, it seems, two choices. If we charge in, we can get rid of them quickly. Or we could steal in upon them and take them by surprise. The problem with stealth is that, if it doesn't succeed, we might be worse off than if we charge.

A challenge, and one I find I relish. Suddenly, as the army marches on, I feel as if I were born to command. I hope this battle won't prove me wrong.

If Derek orders a charge, turn to Section 11.

If Derek has his comrades use Stealth to take the guard by surprise, turn to Section 16.

—13—

Half walking, half running, sleeping in fifteen-minute snatches, we come before dawn to the Black Road. We see it as we reach the top of a steep, grassy hill, and together we watch as the moonlight gleams off it. It is a thing of both beauty and terror, and each of us in turn feels for it the deepest reverence and the deepest loathing. Black, straight, and hypnotizing, it runs forever to the east and to the west.

West we've decided to go, and westwards we now turn our eyes. One glance is all it takes to make us wish we were heading east instead. Where the east has some semblance of green, the west very quickly becomes brown. Where it is not brown, it is closer to black.

I have never before encountered a truly bleak landscape. I feel that by the time the day is out, I will understand entirely what bleak means. It's not an understanding I honestly want.

We begin our march with our eyes downcast, even though none of us thinks we have made the wrong choice. The day dawns hot. Sticky, humid air eats into our nostrils and covers our necks with a thin film of sweat and dirt. Mosquitoes make their final stand in whatever cool remains, before retreating to make a determined onslaught tonight. Ahead of us, the cicadas screech ominously. Behind us, an army marches to the sound of a bellowing trumpet.

To our left now, the Black Road keeps what seems a perfectly straight path. Beside it no grass grows, but we are far enough from it to walk in sickly, but living, fields. Throughout the march we see no living creature, not even a lowly field mouse. Whatever once lived here does so no longer.

Like a magnet, the Black Road draws us closer. Within

an hour we are less than twenty yards away from it, and each step to the west seems to take us another inch or so to the south. Tempted as I am to look at the road, though, I manage to keep my eyes focused on the west. Nothing tempts me there.

Suddenly I hear a gasp, a choked cry. Whirling around, I see McManus's frightened eyes staring to where his right hand points. The Black Road. Turning towards it, I understand why he is afraid.

In the center of the Black Road, atop what seems to be a footprint, a huge snake stands like a cobra, its eyes raking across us as we walk. For a second we stand frozen, the pounding of our hearts the only sound we hear. The snake is ugly. It is also fascinating. Green and deep black, the circles on its body seem to shimmer in the hot morning sun. The shimmer grows stronger, and the circles begin to whirl. Tired and hot, I cannot tear my eyes from it.

I take one step towards it. Then a second. And now a third. Then I feel something shatter my lungs as I feel myself fall hard to the ground. My mouth tastes dirt that is bitter and burnt as I feel my face being slapped. When I open my eyes. I see the face of Tom Samuelson, looking at me from only a foot away. He is lying on top of me while two of the others pin my arms.

"I'm all right," I whisper, my voice hoarse with the taste of the dirt. "I'm fine. Just let me catch my breath." None of them moves as I drink in the hot, thick air. "Now, off!" I order. "Let me get to my feet."

"Not yet, Derek," Tom's voice insists. "First, we have to drag you away from here. I don't think it's safe yet."

"Drag me away from where? Where am I?"

Tom hesitates, then speaks. "About ten feet from the Black Road. Another couple seconds and you would have been on it. We got to you just in time."

I shake my head, but it won't clear. "What happened?" I mutter, not sure if I really want to know.

"You were hypnotized," Stan McManus pipes in. "Just

like I was, until Tom kicked the hell out of me. That was some snake, huh?"

I think about this for a second, and something doesn't seem quite right. "Why was I hypnotized, and you, but not Tom here? What's he got that we haven't got?" Knowing this could be a touchy question, I try to make it sound as humorous as possible.

"That's not important," Tom evades. "Let's just say that I knew a bit better what to expect. I've seen the Black Road before, Derek, and I didn't like it any better than I do now." He pauses. "Now, are you okay? Can we drag you away from here?" At my nod, he does so.

When they finally release me, I sit up and look at my hands. The backs of both of them are burned. Not a lot, but enough to give me pain. Tom digs down into the ground and retrieves some mud to act as a salve. The mud is cool, but it stinks. Hot and thirsty, I take a small drink from the container I laughingly call a canteen, a container made of boiled leather, and I rise to continue our march. The one thing we don't want, I decide, is to have the army find us. They'd not likely be sympathetic.

The rest of the morning is uneventful, as is most of the afternoon. The only *event*, and this is hardly important, is the enormity of the heat. Late in the morning the sound of the hot days of an early August day in Toronto give way to the silence of a blistering day the likes of which I know only from movies set in the desert, and by early afternoon our progress has almost come to a halt. We are nearly sick with the heat, sick with a hunger we don't even want to abate, sick with a thirst we can't even describe. Not knowing where we might find more water, we are especially loathe to drink. The only one of us who keeps marching straight ahead, although even he appears bedraggled and worn, is good old Tom. I'm beginning to wonder about him.

Late in the afternoon, with the sun partway down to our right but still as hot as before, we stumble to the top of a small knoll. To a man we fall to our faces when we reach

the crest, exhausted with the effort of forcing ourselves away from the magnetic road. Not intending to sleep, we soon find our eyes closing by themselves as the sun beats mercilessly down upon us. Colors stream through my brain as sweat bathes my face, and suddenly in that split-second transition between waking and sleep I hear the voices.

Ugly they are, raspy and threatening, loud and malicious in their cruel and meaningless laughter. I cannot understand their speech, but it sounds so loathsome that even if it were taught to me, I would instantly block it from my mind. For a moment, though, it is horrible without being horrifying. Only with a mind-piercing howl, the sound to which we all leap to our feet, do the voices suddenly become possessed of evil. And that evil is directed towards us.

From out of the Black Road they come, six hideous figures bearing swords that burn with black flame and spiked shields that drip with black poison. All of them are coal-black, with bald heads and thick arms and legs. The smallest is six feet tall and broadly built, the muscles on his chest and shoulders rippling with energy and wet with sweat. They walk towards us out of the haze of the unrelenting sun, our minds tired and weary, our muscles sore and needing sleep. And as the hot breeze blows softly from behind them, it brings with it a smell as foul and as noisome as anything I could ever have imagined. The creatures reek. Oh, God, how they reek.

And we are tired. So tired. So goddamned hot and tired.

As the creatures charge at us, their swords drawn and their teeth bared, I realize we have two choices. We can fight or we can surrender. There is no time to run.

If Derek decides to fight, turn to Section 20.

If he decides to surrender to the creatures, turn to Section 26.

— 14 —

"All right, Katyrina," I state, as forcefully as I can. "You're on. You have my soul if you want it. If it's the only way for me to get to Amber, then I'll do it." Part of me is beginning to disbelieve this whole scene. Skeptical as I've been about my mission all along, even though I've always felt I was right, I am having a hard time accepting Katyrina's role and my willingness to surrender my soul. But if none of this is really happening, I won't be losing anything, and if it *is* happening, then I have much to gain. If it gets me to Amber, it should be worth it.

"This is really important to you, isn't it?" she asks in response. "You truly think you can take a handful of men to Amber and do something significant." Her tone is less mocking than sympathetic, and I detect in it a note of awe.

Surprising myself, I notice that her reaction matters to me. "Yes," I offer. "It's that important." After a long pause, I ask my inevitable question. "How do I surrender my soul?" I add, as an afterthought and an attempt at humor, "I've never done it before."

Nobody laughs.

With no hint of a smile, no sign of mockery, no suggestion of denigration, Katyrina Emerson turns her brilliant eyes on me and states, "You've already done it." Stunned, I watch as she walks towards me and takes my left hand in her right, and I listen unbelievably as she says, her voice betraying a sudden tenderness, "Come with me now, Derek, and I will send you to Amber."

I jerk my hand away. "What do you mean, I've already done it? I haven't done anything. I mean, don't I have to sign a document or something? Or get operated on? Or swear fealty to some god or another? Anything like that?" My face must be contorted with my questions, because Katyrina laughs as I speak.

"You mean signing your name in blood, as in *Dr. Faustus*? Or clicking your heels and twirling around three times? That sort of thing?" I nod, and she explains, "No, Derek, none of that is necessary. It's a nice dramatic touch of course, and it emphasizes the importance of your surrender, but giving away one's soul is much easier than that. All you have to do is mean what you say when you give it.

"It's not like offering it to the person you're in love with. That's just melodrama, something designed totally for effect, even if you really do love the person that much. What you've done here is to show your willingness to sacrifice yourself for someone else. You don't even have any idea what I intend to do with your soul, and still you were willing to do it. If you'd really been a Faustlike person, I would have taken the soul, but I wouldn't have wanted it. I don't like selfish people, and neither do those in charge. As corny as it sounds, even in this day and age, self-sacrifice is a thing of honor. So you've given me your soul already. I promise to keep it well."

Stopping, I lose myself for a minute in thought. Finally I say, "But I don't feel any different. I still think the same things and hold the same beliefs. All those things that a soul is good for. What have I lost by surrendering it?" It's true. I can notice no difference whatsoever.

"Look, Derek," Katyrina replies, "I don't intend to sit here and explain what souls are. I don't have time, and, frankly, I don't really know. But they aren't what you seem to think they are. Let's just say that you've given me yourself—your essence, if you will—to do with as I please. I said earlier that it would fetch a good price, and it will. But I haven't decided yet what to do with it."

"When will I notice it?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "You won't. When it happens, you'll be beyond knowing. That's why you haven't felt anything yet. If I change your essence, you will never notice it at all. You'll just become the person I make of you."

"Then I haven't really surrendered anything."

"Practically speaking, no. But spiritually speaking, you've done it all. Now, would you please come with me. You have a long journey ahead of you. Gather your men and follow me." She strides off into the living room, and Tom calls the others to the top of the stair. Pausing for a second, Katyrina opens the bedroom door.

Inside, a dull blue illuminates a room with no furniture. Opposite me is a window, but thick Venetian blinds cover it completely, keeping the blue light out of sight of the street. On the walls hang tapestries of various hues and sizes, the scenes on them ranging from smoking volcanoes to knights in black armor to black clouds thick with snow.

On the floor is a series of lines and boxes, all of them connected and all of them differently colored. Katyrina begins to walk through the pattern, motioning for us to follow her. We do as she has asked, each of us marveling at the zigzagging she does, each of us wondering if the route she is taking is in any way necessary. But as we near the center of the room, I see where she is headed. Only a few feet ahead is a small circular door with a notch carved into the center. A little larger than a manhole cover, the circular door clearly leads down.

Katyrina reaches for the notch and pulls up. It opens slowly to one side and stands perpendicular to the floor. Once it is open, I peer down through the hole. Only blackness greets me.

"What's all this?" I ask. "Where does this lead?"

"To Amber," Katyrina replies. "That is where you want to go, isn't it?" To my nod, she adds, "Of course, the door leading down isn't exactly necessary, but as a piece of staging it's very effective. Do you recognize what this room is modeled after?" The smile on her face is enchanting even in my fear.

"No," I mumble. "Not at all."

"Strange," she says, almost to herself. "I'd have thought you would." Then, after a moment's hesitation, "The film version of *Dr. Faustus*. With Burton and Taylor. Do you

remember it? I always thought it was very effective, so I adopted the idea."

Of course. Richard Burton as the doctor who sold his soul to the devil, about to descend into hell in payment. A man beyond all hope of redemption, a man unable to understand the enormity of the consequences of his actions. A grotesque, ugly, huge hole in the middle of the room, with Mephistopheles drawing him down into hell. All in all, one of the most frightening movie scenes I remember. Half in curiosity and half in terror, I look down into the hole.

For a full minute I see nothing. Then, suddenly, a blackness begins to roil toward me, carrying with it the horrendous stench of rotting and burning flesh. I stagger, and begin to turn away. But something is holding me, something that will not let me go, and against my will I stand rooted to my place. Up, ever up, the blackness rolls on, and as it comes, my brain goes dark. As the reek of death carries me beyond consciousness, I fight for one last look into the dark. There, below me, hideous outside the realm of human acceptance, a vision of chaos swims before my eyes. Screaming, I fall inside, and hear the screams of my comrades as I fall, all of them but voices in the unrelenting dark.

Turn to Section 18.

— 15 —

But Nichol's line of questioning echoes in my mind, and I begin to doubt the wisdom of attack. Even without maps, traveling with, or alongside, this size army will help us pass for Amberites later, when we need it most.

Over the next three days we follow beside the army. Remaining concealed among the ever-sloping hills, we walk and crawl our way to the army's destination. What

that destination is, we don't yet know, but with every passing day we grow a little closer to that knowledge.

In the end, after several tense sessions of spying and eavesdropping, we understand where the army is going. A conference of commanders, which Branko overhears, reveals that the march leads towards the Black Road, that mysterious path that runs the length of the First Shadow, from Amber to Chaos. Once they reach the Road, they will turn towards the west in an attempt to reach Chaos. Tom expresses disbelief and disgust at this plan.

Finally, though, the army comes near the Road. Less than two miles away from it, a short morning's march, they camp for the night. This is the night, I realize, when we must decide where to go. The army has afforded us protection and escort thus far. From here we must go alone.

If Derek decides to head east towards Amber, turn to Section 32.

If he chooses to march west towards Chaos, turn to Section 13.

— 16 —

They are fighting men, these that I have brought to my father's land. And we achieved our current position easily. Why not continue this strategy? A well-executed sneak attack will save us wounds, strength, and confidence.

I find myself anticipating the opportunity to lead my men into action and to watch them perform as a unit. A good commander must know his troops—their capabilities and weaknesses—and I have not had the wherewithal to sound mine out. This action will be a test in many ways. I hope we are, all of us, up to the challenges.

Section 17

Roll two six-sided dice and read the result.

If the result is less than the Stealth Value of Derek's troops (9), turn to Section 19.

If the result is greater than 9, turn to Section 17.

— 17 —

Crawling from rock to rock, darting one by one in a crouch across the open spaces, we slowly approach the guard. The trick, as I discover, is to move only when absolutely certain the way is clear, to take no chances at being discovered. Individually this would be difficult; as a group it is damned near impossible. I am lucky that the others know almost instinctively what they are to do. If I had to command them all, we would be caught instantly.

As we near, the tension grows great. My hands are sweating, my grip strong on my sword when we reach a spot where we can see each guard's face clearly. They are battle-hardened faces, but they are not cruel. Their eyes are clear, their purpose worthy. Suddenly I am beset by a pang of regret, that in order to get what I want, some of these men might die. I wonder if I am cold-blooded enough to carry it through.

But now our last move faces us. The guard is only two short crawls away, both over the crests of small hills. Once over the first, by far the more dangerous, a line of rocks and crevices will hide us until we mount our charge. But the hard part is before us now.

Tom goes first. His head and stomach pressed to the ground, he drags himself over the crest. If the guard look up now, they will see him, but luckily they don't. Then Tom lets himself roll over the top, and somehow he makes no noise. One by one the others follow.

My turn. This is hard work. My fingers hurt as they dig

Section 18

into the ground, and my stomach hurts as it feels the stones dig in. But over the top I go, and like the others, I let myself fall. My wrist twists beneath me as I roll, and from my lips escapes a sharp yell.

McManus shouts. The guard has heard, and they rush towards us.

Using the rules for combat, determine the winner of the battle. Because Derek's men have failed to use their Stealth, the guard gets to attack first. The guard numbers nine men, with an Ordnance Value of 6. Their Attack Strength, therefore, is 54. They attack on Chart D.

As the stats sheet shows, Derek's men have an Ordnance Value of 6. Multiply this value by the number of men in Derek's squad to determine the Attack Strength. Find this number along the top of Chart C, roll two dice, and cross-reference to find the number of guards killed by the first attack.

Remember that you can, at the start of any round, arm Derek's men with the guns they carry with them. If you do so, increase Derek's Ordnance Value to 10. Also, mark a "1" in the RAL section of the stats sheet.

If Derek wins (that is, kills all the guard), turn to Section 23.

If Derek loses (all his men are killed, including himself), turn to Section 37.

— 18 —

I awaken to the sounds of drumming. Stretching out in the dark as far as I can see, a field of brown mud holds the silhouettes of hundreds of armed men. Some bear swords, others spears, some axes, others bows, and all are on their

feet, obviously eager to march. Over the horizon I see the beginnings of dawn, the dawn of a cloudless, hot day. I feel exposed and vulnerable with the approach of daylight.

Shaking the haze from my eyes, I lie on my stomach and look around me for the others. A few feet away I see Tom, Verdi, and Nichol, and the shapes of Goate, Brando, and Simmie show themselves against the lightening sky as they crawl towards me. When Simmie reaches me, I order him to search for the others while we get ourselves out of sight. Dressed as we are, we are thoroughly out of place among the soldiers near us, and before we do anything else, we have to find new clothes.

Together we crawl towards a depression in the ground and drop out of sight. My head once again foggy, I roll onto my back and close my eyes. Goate crawls over to me.

"What's the problem, boss," he asks, in an obvious attempt at levity.

"My head," I whisper. "I can't seem to clear it. I feel as if I've slept for days and can't wake up." Seeing his concern, I manage a smile. "Don't worry about it. I'll be okay. Just give me a few minutes."

"I'd like to, Derek," replies Goate, "but I don't think we have a few minutes. Light is on its way, and that army looks big. If we're going to be in a fight, I'd rather take on a smaller group than that armed mob. And hiding, in these clothes at least, is going to be a bit of a chore."

He's right, of course, but my head hurts just enough for me not to care. "Look," I say, "I appreciate your worry. But right now I'm exhausted, and I feel completely drained. I don't know where we've fallen to, but I do know the fall has been a long one, and I'm not ready to start thinking yet. So please," and here I soften my tone, "please let me rest. Only for a minute."

"Sure, Derek." Goate nods, pushing himself away. "But not too long, okay? This may not be the most eventful day of our lives, but it's going to come awfully close. I'd like to be around to see most of it." A pause, then he continues, his voice almost apologetic. "Rest,

guy. I'll help the others see what's up." He touches my arm as he rises to leave.

I wish I felt differently. I really do. It would be nice if something suggested that I no longer had a soul, or that I had fallen into hell, or something. For all I know, though, except for the archaic armament of the army nearby, this may be just another day in late twentieth-century earth. I have a headache, but apart from that I feel quite normal. What was Faust's big problem, anyway?

Tom interrupts. "Simmie's got the others," he whispers excitedly, "and you should see what else he's got." He motions for me to join him, and I roll onto my hands and knees and follow. Mud seeps through my clothes.

When I reach the others, most of them are half clad in soldier's dress: trousers of treated skins and leathers, short-sleeved tunics fashioned from the skin of some animal or another, and hard leather boots. A motley but complete collection of swords, spears, and bows lies in a heap to my left, with Simmie and Jonathan already picking them over. As I stare, disbelieving, Darcy McCrimmon arrives carrying three small shields, and after placing them on the ground, he nods for Brando to join him to collect some more. In awe at the resourcefulness of my comrades, and at their obvious talents for grand theft, I sit in the mud and laugh to myself. I can't help but think of the soldiers who will discover the absence of the equipment we now have. How do you explain stolen clothes?

Branko Verdi walks towards me, carrying a small bundle inside an upside-down shield. "For you, boss," he says for all to hear. "Without a doubt the classiest duds of the lot. When he places them at my feet I examine them, marveling anew at my group's ingenuity, and noting as well that the clothes are, in fact, almost new. The pants are fairly loose, a good thing considering the day's heat, the tunic is untorn and bears only a couple of stains—blood, I assume, since I have no proof that spaghetti sauce is a staple here—and the boots, while a little large, are without cuts in the leather. The shield itself is ornamented

only with an abstract carving in the center, and the sword is plain, sturdy, double-edged, and not inordinately heavy.

Dressed at last, my head feels suddenly clear. Maybe the place we're in, I think with a smile, cannot handle the reality of blue jeans and cloth T-shirts, the clothes I brought with me and which, little to my surprise, are now being buried by three of my men. Where they found shovels I'm not sure I even want to know.

As the sun rises full over the horizon, Tom approaches me and sits on the ground beside me. "Where to now, Derek?" he inquires, and suddenly I am jolted into reality. For the last hour I have enjoyed being in the background, giving no orders and being asked for no decisions. Now, though, that is all coming to an end. Once again I will have to figure out what to do. Not that I'm going to act unilaterally, though, not with a group around me that's this talented.

"I'm not sure," I answer. "I don't even know where we are. All I know is that I want to get to Amber." I pause, then ask, "Any ideas?"

"Not yet," he responds immediately, and I am relieved to find no hint of scorn in his voice at my lack of precision. "But I think the first step is to do a bit of information gathering. Seems we're a bit short of that."

Smiling, I say, "True. Little things, like where we are, who these people are, what it's like to fight without guns." Then it dawns on me. "Our guns," I blurt out. "Where are they?"

Pointing behind him, Tom replies, "Branko's got them in a leather bag. We'll pass them out in a second. But I don't think we should use them. Not here, anyway, where swords and bows are the common fighting tools."

"Agreed," I say, quite uselessly. "They're a nice trump card, though."

Trump card. Amber. My father. Suddenly I remember why we've come, why I've hired this little street gang to join me in my search. And just as suddenly, I realize something unusual. How have these people, who had no

idea where we were going, been able to accept better than I where we are and what we have to do? They should be lost, furious, unnerved, something. But here they are, taking command of the situation as if they'd planned it, without even a question about what Amber is or why it's so necessary that we be here. It's time for me to find out why.

"Tom," I say, and then pause. "Tom, aren't you a little uncertain about what we're doing here?" What an inept question.

Tom laughs gently and shakes his head. "Not really," he says. "After all," and here he directs a smile straight at me, "we've all been here before." I sit stunned as he begins to crawl back towards the others, motioning with his right hand for me to follow. Switching from a sit to a crawl, I do precisely that.

By the time I reach the others, Tom has seated himself with them in a circle. A space has been left for me. I enter it and sit cross-legged, a position that invariably puts my legs to sleep within seconds, and wait for one of them to speak. Finally Dennis Nichol raises the index finger of his right hand to his forehead in a signal for silence.

"None of your poetry, Dennis, all right?" The voice is McCrimmon's, and the others laugh softly at his demand.

Smiling, Nichol fakes an Oxford accent and says, "It is the bard's responsibility to provide the wisdom necessary for his civilization to continue. In our case, the wisdom is doubly necessary, as none of us is entirely certain of our course of action." With that, he lays his head into the palms of his hands.

McCrimmon looks to the sky. "Oh, my God. He's at it again." Lying back on the ground, he turns his head towards Stan McManus and says, "Wake me up when he's finished. And take notes, in case he says anything useful."

Tom cuts in. "Seriously, folks," and McCrimmon sits back up, "I think we've got a few problems here. First of all, we don't know exactly where we are. Secondly, we

don't know exactly where we're going. Lastly, we don't know exactly what Derek wants us to do." He pauses and looks at me. "I think we should start by asking Derek to help us with the last one." Another pause, then, "What *are* we supposed to be doing?"

Without hesitation, I look straight at Tom and insist, "Find Amber, and find Random. I want to know who killed Eric." Then, to let them in on something they have no way of knowing, I state, flat out, "Eric was my father." The time has come, I suspect, for them to know the truth.

A long silence ensues. The men look at one another, then at the ground, then around the circle again. Once more it is Tom who speaks, this time in little over a whisper. "That answers a number of questions, Derek. I wish you'd told me earlier."

"Why?" I ask. "What difference would it have made?"

"We'd have prepared differently. We knew you wanted us to fight for you, and we knew that we were going to Amber to do it, but we didn't know what you wanted there. I think we all figured you'd be wanting a fight with Chaos, not with Amber. At least, we're all inclined that way." He has said all this so matter-of-factly that I've scarcely noticed the enormous assumptions he's making. He assumes, first of all, that I understand that he knows about Amber, and, in fact, that he knows about Chaos and Eric. More importantly, though, he seems to feel I should just accept the fact that he knows I wanted to come here.

"How did you know, Tom," I ask, willing my voice not to show its agitation, "that I wanted to get to Amber?"

"Simple," he answers. "It was told to me."

"Oh, come on," I snap. "Don't give me that fantasy-novel stuff. How did you know it? Beyond 'inspiration from the gods' or some such nonsense. I told nobody. Nobody at all."

Tom contorts his mouth as he sucks at his teem. "Okay, Derek," he says at last. "You've told us about your father, so I guess it's only fair we tell you about us." He

looks at the others, some of whom nod while others do not move at all.

"We're not who you think we are," he begins in an exaggerated dramatic voice. "In fact," he smiles, "we're not even who *we* think we are." This brings grins from a few of the others. "What we are," a pause, "what we are is a collection of soldiers who once fought for Amber. Or, to be more precise"—he looks straight at me—"for Brand."

"Brand?" I break in. "Eric's brother Brand? One of the nine princes?"

Tom nods. "The very same. The man Corwin writes into his story as the enemy of Amber, the foil of Corwin the prince. The one who tried to redraw the Pattern in his own image. The would-be God, the would-be ruler. The man who, deep down, was the reason your father died."

That part, at least, I've thought of. There is nothing new in the idea that Brand caused my father's death. Since he, clandestinely at least, arranged the attack on Amber that killed Dad, it hardly surprised me that he should be considered Eric's killer. At one level, at least.

But there's more to it than that. Sure, the battle killed Dad, but that is only the fact of his death, not the cause. What I have to figure out is who takes the blame for the battle itself. Brand, yes, because he was Amber's enemy. But why was he the enemy? To listen to Corwin's story, Brand was evil, at least primarily so. But maybe the cause of that evil goes back further than Corwin tells us. Maybe Corwin himself is the ultimate cause of Eric's death.

I don't want to tell all of this to my comrades, but I must let them know something. So I begin with a question.

"Maybe," I reply to Tom's last point. "But that's assuming one thing. It's assuming that Corwin is telling the truth. Personally, I see no reason to make that assumption."

"But Derek," Simmie breaks in. "What choice do we have? Corwin is the reason we know as much as we do."

"Or as little as we do," I insist. "Look, assuming I

believe you were all here before, how important were you? Were you Brand's confidants? Did you have special knowledge?"

"No," McCrimmon joins in, a bit hesitantly. "But we knew Brand well enough to agree with Corwin's descriptions of him and his personality. He was like that, at least by reputation."

"Reputation? Did you know him personally, or only by reputation?"

"By reputation, of course," McCrimmon continues, "but the reputation was so universally felt that I don't think it could have been wrong."

Again I break in. "Universally felt by who? Sorry, by whom?" The objective case has always annoyed me, but I feel naked if I don't use it.

"By the rest of the soldiers," Tom says. "By everyone we heard talk about him. Certainly by his enemies."

I smile. "But don't you see, they don't really know. Even if the reputation is universally felt, it need hardly be true. And what about propaganda? Can't that establish reputation? What if the princes of Amber simply wanted everyone to think as you are? Given their powers, wouldn't that be easy?"

Suddenly they are all silent. Apparently I've struck home. "One other thing," I assert. "How did you know I was coming here?"

"That, my friend," says Dennis Nichol, "is our secret. Suffice it to say that we knew it, and that's why we arranged for you to hire us. Beyond that you don't have to know. Not yet, anyway."

"Hold it," I say, raising my voice. "You didn't arrange it. I did."

Nichol just smiles. "So you think, Derek. So you think. I wish we'd been able to let you go on thinking that. But you keep asking all these questions." After a pause, he adds, "What say we forget about all that and get on with what we came for? Surely that's somewhat more important."

"Hear, hear," Tom cuts in. "Look, Derek," he says as

he looks at me, "we can fill you in on the details as we go. For now, I really think we should be making long-range plans. We're having a nice chat and all, but it's not going to last long." He points towards the army. "Those guys over there are getting ready to move."

"Fine," I say. "But I want the answers. Soon."

"You'll have them," Tom assures me. "But we need some guidance, Derek. Since you hired us, why not tell us what you want done."

"I already told you. I want to get to Amber."

"I know that. But how do we get there? And what do we do once we've arrived? Are we supposed to fight our way there, or proceed by stealth? Do you have any maps? Plans? Or are we just winging it?"

Suddenly I am struck by the enormity of Tom's words. I have not, in fact, formulated any real plans. I have no maps, no idea of whom we'll be fighting, no sense of what to do even if we succeed in finding Random. I don't even know where we're going. All I have is my final goal, but even that is merely abstract.

Except for one point. What I am on, I now realize, is an information-gathering mission. We are a commando squad about to infiltrate an enemy installation (if Amber can be so called) to get information about what happened to one man. Pared down to that, the exercise seems far from hopeless. We are not here to blow something up, we are not trying to rescue a prisoner, and we are not attempting to plant evidence that would lead to the arrest of a prominent citizen. None of that complicated espionage stuff. All we are doing is finding something out. We need fight, therefore, only as far as we must to get what we want. No more, absolutely no more.

"We'd better start," I say with sudden confidence, "by finding out where we are. Then we'll figure out where to go."

Sure, this is obvious, but the effect on the others is immediate. As one they give me their full attention, listening intently so they miss nothing. Yes, I've hired them,

and yes, I will direct them. My commands may be wrong, but they will be definite. And that, to judge from their reaction, is precisely what they want.

"Simmie," I begin my first order. "Take McCrimmon and find out where the army's headquarters is. Or their general's train, or the guy in charge, or whatever the hell they have. We need maps and supplies. The only way we're going to get them is to steal them.

"Brando, you and Nichol can scout out the organization of the army. Find out the size of the marching units. We have to know if we can isolate a squad and take it out without everyone else seeing us.

"The rest of us will wait here. Don't be longer than a half hour. And don't get caught." I bask in my comrades' newfound respect as the four men carry out my commands.

Tom approaches quietly. "Derek, perhaps I should tell you something."

"What now?" I ask, slightly agitated.

"A cute little mouse is crawling up your tunic."

Leaping to my feet, I dance and jump until the creature falls away. As it scampers off across the field, I turn my back to the others and sit down. My face, I realize from its heat, is a deep, lasting red. True respect, it seems, takes a little longer than I thought.

In less than half an hour Simmie and McCrimmon return. Excitedly, they tell me that the supply area, as always a little to the rear of the army, is deserted by all but a guard of nine men. Because the army itself is fairly small—no more than 2000 men, they insist—the headquarters is not a separate area but is kept with the supplies. As far as they were able to ascertain, headquarters consists of no more than four men, one of them in ultimate command. Simmie was able to see inside the HQ tent, where these four were poring over maps and diagrams.

As they finish, Brando and Nichol come back as well. The army, as far as they could see, is made up of 100-man units, each under the command of someone with a red shield. Whom he reports to they do not know, but they

believe the 100-man unit breaks into six 15-man units and an elite 10-man unit. The elite group reports directly to the 100-man commander; the others have a subcommander of their own.

"The first thing," I say after weighing the information, "is to find out where we are, then to decide where we want to go. Once we know that, we can, if Brando and Nichol are right, take out one of the 15-man units, preferably when they are fighting anyway, and take their place. We may have to keep one or two of them alive, to take care of little things like the differences in language and training, but it can't be too hard. Once we've done that, we can follow the army for as long as we want, then disappear. The other way, of course, is to go off by ourselves right after studying the maps."

"Actually," Tom cuts in, "the plan may be quite easy to carry out. If this army is like any other minor army around here—as I remember them, anyway—the individual soldier is completely unimportant. The guys in charge of the 100-man units, who we used to call *hecturions*, take a head count, but there's no such thing as roll call. If someone's missing, it's assumed they're dead. If they do an AWOL, there's no place for them to go anyway."

"What we'll do, then," I say after a short silence, "is get through the provost guard to the maps. We'll have to do it, though, when the commanders aren't around. I don't feel like taking on all 2000 at once."

Standing up, I survey the army. They have still not moved forward, but are ready to do so at any time. I see clearly now the hecturions with their red shields, their horses turned to face their subordinates. At this moment, their prime function seems to be to keep everyone still, to stop any advance movement. The HQ is to their rear, but it is still too close to the main army to tackle now. Surrounding it, armed with swords and shields, axes beside some of them and spears beside others, stand the provost guard, their attention riveted to the outlying areas. This isn't, I realize, going to be easy.

I sit back down and *look* at my comrades. They are simply waiting for me. I like that. Of course, I'm paying them, so they really have little choice, but I am suddenly struck by the amount of attention they pay to my orders and suggestions. Obviously, I'm better at this than I thought. Or at least I think I am.

"Simmie," I order, enjoying the confidence I hear in my voice, "take McCrimmon again, and keep your eye on the HQ. As soon as at least two of the commanders leave, tell me immediately. Branko, you and Stan watch for the army to move. When they do, let me know their speed and where they seem to be going. And anything else you see." The two men leave at once.

"The minute the HQ area is down to one commander, or with luck none at all, we move. We take out the provost guard as quickly and quietly as we can, then we go for the maps, plans, anything we can get our hands on. We bring them all back here and figure out what to do next. We don't know who's going to make it through to the tent, so the first one to get the goods lets either Tom or me know about it. We'll gather the others and head back here. Any questions?"

"Just one, boss," Nichol says. "What if the provost guard makes noise. Won't someone hear us? And what if the commanders return while we're doing this? We could be in considerable trouble."

He's right, of course. Damned stupid plan, anyway. Obviously, I've forgotten one thing. The army isn't in battle yet. They won't be making enough noise to mask our movements. In all likelihood, we'd be better off waiting for a fight, then going in. Why didn't I think of that before?

Suddenly the army starts to move. Men shout orders. Others shout more orders. Horses stamp and whinny. Noise reigns. And then, like a giant boulder about to be loosed from its perch on the side of a hill, the weight of 2000 men and 400 horses begins to move inexorably forward, its momentum carrying it beyond the point at which one man

can easily control it. The boulder rolls on south, the dawning day gilding its flank.

Out of the dust that rises on the field, Simmie runs towards us. "It's happened," he shouts above the clamor. "Three of the commanders have gone, and the fourth is about to. The guard has put away their weapons for the march, and they're all facing forward. We could get around the back and take them by surprise." He stands and waits for my reply.

If Derek orders an assault on the guard in order to look at maps and plans, turn to Section 12.

If Derek decides to follow out of sight alongside the army, to see where it is going, turn to Section 15.

— 19 —

Crawling from rock to rock, darting one by one in a crouch across the open spaces, we slowly approach the guard. The trick, as I discover, is to move only when absolutely certain the way is clear, to take no chances at being discovered. Individually this would be difficult; as a group it is damned near impossible. I am lucky that the others know almost instinctively what they are to do. If I had to command them all, we would be caught instantly.

As we near, the tension grows great. My hands are sweating, my grip strong on my sword when we reach a spot where we can see each guard's face clearly. They are battle-hardened faces, but they are not cruel. Their eyes are clear, their purpose worthy. Suddenly I am beset by a pang of regret, that in order to get what I want, some of these men might die. I wonder if I am cold-blooded enough to carry it through.

But now our last move faces us. The guard is only two short crawls away, both over the crests of small hills.

Section 19

Once over the first, by far the more dangerous crest, a line of rocks and crevices will hide us until we mount our charge. But the hard part is before us now.

Tom goes first. His head and stomach pressed to the ground, he drags himself over the crest. If the guard look up now, they will see him, but luckily they don't. Then Tom lets himself roll over the top, and somehow he makes no noise. One by one, the others follow.

My turn. This is hard work. My fingers hurt as they dig into the ground, and my stomach hurts as it feels the stones dig in. But over the top I go, and like the others I let myself fall. My wrist twists slightly beneath me as I roll to where my comrades lie flat.

And then, as one, we leap to our feet and charge over the last hill. The eyes of the guards are filled with shock as they see us rush towards them.

Using the rules for combat, determine the winner of the battle. As the stats sheet shows, Derek's men have an Ordnance Value of 6. Multiply this value by the number of men in Derek's squad to determine the Attack Strength. Find this number along the top of Chart C, roll two dice, and cross-reference to find the number of guards killed by the first attack.

For this combat, because Derek's men have successfully used their Stealth, they get two attacks before the guards get their first. The guard numbers nine men, with an Ordnance Value of 6. Their Attack Strength, therefore, is 54. They attack on Chart D.

Remember that you can, at the start of any round, arm Derek's men with the guns they carry with them. If you do so, increase Derek's Ordnance Value to 10. Also, mark a "1" in the RAL section of the stats sheet.

Section 20

If Derek wins (that is, kills all the guards), turn to Section 23.

If Derek loses (all his men are killed, including himself), turn to Section 34.

— 20 —

I don't like surrendering.

Over the hoarse screams of our enemies, I manage to make my voice heard. "We're gonna fight, men," I yell, trying to sound as confident as I can. "We're tired, but I think we can win this." And then I lift my head and deliver the best war cry I possibly can.

Tom joins instantly, but he is alone. The others hang back, uncertain and afraid. I understand, but I can't let it happen. Tom and I alone don't have a prayer.

"Come on," I shout. "They're almost on us." Then, more forcefully, "Now, damn it! We need you!" I look at my comrades and see them wavering under the terrifying approach of the black creatures.

To see if they will fight, make a Morale roll. To do this, roll two six-sided dice and compare the result to the Morale Value (9) for Derek's men. If the roll is less than 9, the Morale roll succeeds. If not, it fails.

If the Morale roll succeeds, turn to Section 45.

If the Morale roll fails, turn to Section 27.

—21—

I parry the first sword that slashes at me, and as I swing away from it, I manage to cut through the wrist that holds it. A minor victory, since the creature simply switches to another hand, but one that makes me realize these creatures can be beaten. "They bleed!" I shout at the top of my lungs, then steady my feet and swing once more. This time a hideous black head falls to the ground at my feet.

My heart pumps loudly now, and my spirits soar. I don't know what chance I have in this battle, but in some ways I don't care. No matter what the outcome, to have discovered at last this newfound joy I have, a joy in battle—in fighting for good—is worth even dying for. I swing my sword with strength, with confidence, with the knowledge that I will not be an easy victim for anyone or anything.

For Eric! my heart sings. *For Father!* And suddenly the face of my father, the face I have never seen but have long imagined, appears in my mind as I fight. The face is grim, and it is sad. But to me it looks proud as well, proud of the son who fights in his place, and that, too, spurs me on. This battle may be my last, but it will not have been in vain. I have seen my father. He has seen me.

But then I turn my head and see the toll on my comrades. Only four of us remain, against three of the creatures. Then another friend falls, and finally another, and now only Tom and I face the fury of three furious enemies. On we fight, our swords singing in the hot sun. We look at one another and smile, not because we are about to die but because we will die as we would have chosen. In battle. Against evil. Against the spawns of hell, or of Chaos, or perhaps of both.

A grotesque black hand smashes into my jaw. An unspeakably hideous face peers into mine. An ugly voice

laughs, and its breath is vile beyond words. I reel, clutch at one last breath of air, and fall.

My eyes close as long, black teeth descend towards my face. Only a scream remains.

Turn to Section 29.

—22—

We might not win again. That is the thought that keeps going through my mind as I sit in the darkness of the pre-dawn. Towards Chaos may lie our goal, but goals are meaningless if they can't be achieved. We survived an attack. Can we survive another?

Then again, there may not be another. Maybe this was it. Maybe nobody expected us to get past this guard. Maybe there are no more guards set up.

Something about this last thought bothers me. If this is a guard, then we have been expected. If that's the case, there will surely be more. If this wasn't a guard, though, then we have no idea of Chaos's power. Or at least of the power of the Black Road. If it can do this, randomly throwing out a half-dozen excellent troops, who's to say it can't do even more?

I've had enough. It's time to turn east.

Turn to Section 32.

—23—

The guards fight well, their training at sword and spear obvious from the start. They strike us hard on our right side, staggering us and knocking us back. Parrying each blow, slashing back with strength and will, they stop us for a time right in our tracks.

But our left side meets with early success, as three guards fall to the cut of our swords. Step after step we push them back, guard after guard falling beneath us. Finally our left side breaks through, and when we have them surrounded, the fighting is short.

As the last guard falls, I grimace in pain.

Ahead of us now is the HQ wagon. Taking but a few seconds' breather, we gather together and walk towards it. Three of us will go inside, the rest remaining on guard. From a distance, we all look like the guards anyway.

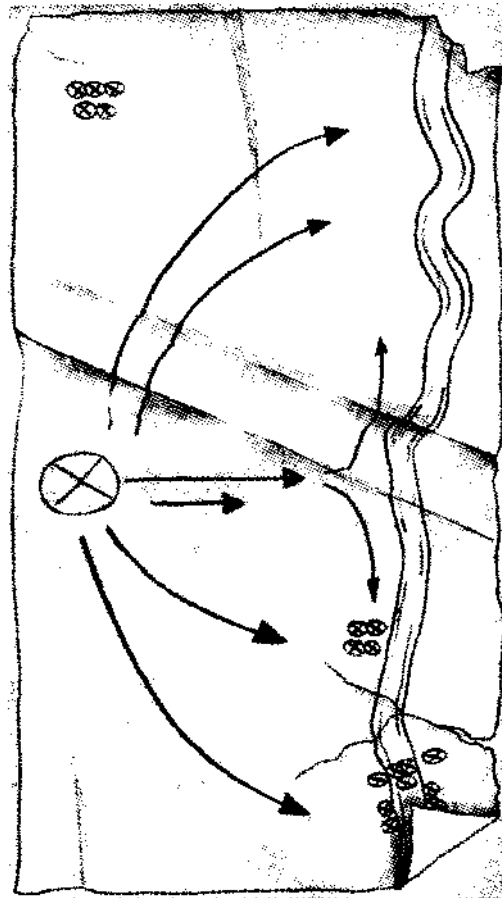
The wagon is empty. Whoever the fourth commander was, he disappeared before we arrived. My only hope is that he cleared out before, not during, the attack. The last thing we need is an army dropping down on us.

Large but hardly sturdy, the wagon contains a small table with four chairs. Along the walls are five sealed wooden boxes. None of them contain any markings, but when we open them, I fully expect to find plans, files, papers of all kinds. This is an army, after all, and even ancient armies run under the strength of bureaucracy. I doubt if this one is any different.

Look at the map.

On the table is a map, hand-drawn in black and white, evidently a hasty creation by someone not all that well-schooled in cartography. But it tells us all we want to know. The army is headed south towards a road marked plainly in black, a road that runs east and west. Each way along the road runs an arrow that confirms where we are. One arrow points towards the east and is labeled *Amber*. The other points west and is labeled *Chaos*. "The Black Road," my comrades whisper in unison, their voices hushed and drawn.

Another arrow, this one thicker than the others, leads from the army's location and turns west at the road. Clearly, then, this group plans to head towards Chaos. I point it out



on the map, but Tom only shakes his head. Whether out of disbelief or ignorance, I cannot tell.

"Let's open the boxes," I say, walking towards them. In a minute we have them open, and quickly we sift through the contents. Papers, maps, charts, even some money, all the bureaucracy we need, lies open to our inspection, and silently I wish for more time. But time is one thing we don't have. The commanders will surely return before long.

What we do find is a preliminary plan. As far as we can tell from the chicken-scratch penmanship, the army intends to turn west along the Black Road and march on Chaos. Exactly what they hope to do isn't clear, but the look on Tom's face is hardly encouraging. I ask him what's wrong.

"There's only two thousand of them," he replies in a quivering voice. "This is a bloody suicide mission. Good God! They may as well send only a squad. At least they'd have some chance of stealing their way through."

"Any chance they'll get reinforcements along the way?" I question him.

He shakes his head. "I don't see how. Unless things have changed a lot, there's no place between here and Chaos to get them from. Come to think of it," he muses after a short pause, "how are they going to get to Chaos in the first place?"

"What do you mean?"

"You can't just march there. It's not a place, like Toronto or New York or something like that. Chaos is, well, a kind of Shadow of some type, or at least that's what I've always thought. The only way to get there is to manipulate Shadows. And only a prince of Amber has that ability."

"Or a prince of Chaos," I mumble, remembering something about the Amber books.

A long silence follows. I don't know what Tom is thinking of, but I understand that I'm going to have to make a decision. Because we've taken out the guard, it would be far too dangerous for us to stay with the army. We aren't that good at disguise. So we're going to have to

leave it, and we have to do so quickly. Our choices are few. We must head for the Black Road, that's clear, and then we must turn either east or west. East to Amber or west to Chaos. Suddenly, I'm not sure I like either choice.

"Derek." Tom's voice breaks my thoughts. "If Random ordered this army to march along the Black Road, then he must know what he's doing. But I can't believe he'd do that, unless one of the commanders is one of the Amberites. And even then, I don't see how anyone could manipulate Shadow enough to take two thousand men with him. But if Random didn't order the army, someone else did. Either an Amberite or a Chaotian—if that's a real word. So we've got a choice. We either stick with the army or try to get to Random and find out what's going on. If the army dies, we die with it. If it joins forces with Chaos, we're in a bit of a pickle. I vote to head for Amber."

True, I think, but one way to Amber is to join with an army that intends to take it out anyway. One thing Tom said, though, absolutely contradicts my analysis. We can't stick with the army. We've killed the guard. Wherever we go, we go on our own.

If Derek decides to go east along the Black Road to Amber, turn to Section 32.

If he decides to head west along the Black Road to Chaos, turn to Section 13.

— 24 —

Yesterday the sun damned near killed us. Today it's the rain. I'm having a lot of trouble believing all this, since it's almost as if the weather, like everything else, is against us. We trudge along, miserable as we've ever been.

This is no cool, refreshing rain. This is a torrent, a

virtual flood of warm, nearly hot, huge drops, and they sting as they fall. Into our skin they bore, into our eyes, our ears, up our noses. We can scarcely breathe as we walk, and we've long since given up seeing. The only thing we have is our smell, and it senses nothing but putrescence.

"Black Rain," Tom called it earlier, hoping to make us all laugh. "Black Rain for the Black Road," I answered, and Tom at least did laugh. Now I wish I hadn't said it. Black Rain for the Black Road is far too accurate to be funny.

What seems to be the day drags on mercilessly. I say "what seems" because we have no idea whether it is day or night. Our only clue that we're still in the day is that the sheets of rain are partially visible. If it were dark, or so I assume, we would not be able to see them at all. The day goes on and on, each of our steps lingering as it touches down. Every step is agony, since we must reach down with both hands to pull our feet out of the quagmire the ground has become. I've been in mud, but this is far worse. It sucks our strength as it suctions our footwear, and it reeks.

Finally, after several hours, the rain abates. It stops in stages, first decreasing the size of the drops and then the rate of their fall. Next the sheets of rain pass by to reveal a last moment of deep blue sky, just at the moment it turns deep gray for the start of the night. And then a breeze, fresh and cool, sweeps over us and makes us suddenly feel alive. As one we stop and drink in the first fresh air we've had for days.

To our right the brown fields slide away from us, down the hill like a river of lava. The parched ground can't handle the sheer amount of the rain, and what remains of topsoil rolls away beneath us as it struggles to absorb more moisture than it can handle. If the fields have been desolate up till now, they will be doubly so when they dry this time.

Ahead of us the small hills stretch on endlessly. Brown

grass still clings to them, but the rain has ended what little life remained. A few sparse conifers, now bent almost double by the fury of the storm, clutch at life in a sad and desperate way. But there is nothing else: no dwellings, no towns, no sign of life or of Chaos. I wonder at my own stupidity.

The Black Road runs straight. As always. As forever. Never yielding, never changing, it simply is. And is. And is. And I realize now, more than ever before, that I have come to hate it.

Walking up to it, because I fear it no longer, I piss on its hard, black surface. As I do so, I laugh.

The laughter is answered by half-human howls.

Jumping back, I turn and run back to the others, where I see the laughter of Tom has turned to a grimace. Turning again to the Road, I see on the other side a host of beings magnificent and truly deadly. Arrows of flame they bear, and with them bows that rest on their arms. Swords, too, and bloodred shields they carry, and each sports a helm with a bloodred jewel. Their skin is golden, their arms and armor red, and from their eyes dance flames that thrust and burn.

Onto the Black Road they step, and when they do, a fire engulfs them whole. For a second I think they are gone, but then I see the flame slowly moving across the Road itself. I wish, suddenly, that I had never known who my father was.

We cannot run, because there is no place to go. Even if we tried, we would gain no time at all in the quagmire that surrounds us. Our choice, as before, is simple. Surrender or fight. Neither inspires me with much hope.

If Derek surrenders, turn to Section 26.

If Derek fights, turn to Section 30.

— 25 —

I know in my soul, or whatever substitute I have that feels like my soul, I *know* I am right. Amber is the direction I must go.

But something is wrong.

Because, although we've marched for almost three days since coming upon the robed figures, we seem to have gone nowhere. The land is the same, field upon brown and useless field, with the Black Road winding along to our right. Few shrubs, even fewer trees, grow here, and those that do are scrawny and gangly, half dead even now. By itself, the landscape is unremarkable. This is the area of the Black Road, and the Black Road does not promote thriving life. What is wrong is simply that nothing has changed. Even though it is night, I know that nothing around me is different.

I don't know distances very well, especially here, but I am fairly certain we should have seen some changes by now. Remembering Corwin's accounts of the Road, I recall how it changed frequently, suddenly, almost unaccountably, with practically every hour of Corwin's life. I've already suggested that Corwin's account is a lie, but I would never have suspected him of lying about every detail. The land itself, I would think, would prompt truthfulness.

But now I remember one more thing about the change in the land. For the most part, Corwin caused it. It is a peculiarity among the children of Amber, especially those who have walked the Pattern of Amber, that they can manipulate the Shadow in which they exist. They can alter landforms, vegetation, even the life of the inhabitants, within that Shadow. Corwin's race to Chaos, it now comes back to me, was a race through a series of Shadows he did not know he could manipulate. Once he learned how, he

was on his way to victory, even though he didn't know it. According to him, at least.

What worries me now is that we may not be making any progress at all. I don't know how to manipulate Shadow. I have never walked the Pattern. It's unlikely that I ever will.

And so we plod on, mile after aching mile, searching for a land we may not be capable of finding.

. . . And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly . . .

"Derek!" A voice cuts through my thoughts. I look at Tom, who points ahead in disbelief. Directly in front of us, not fifteen yards away, stands a woman. A beautiful woman. A woman I feel I know.

Her hair is long, straight, and deep black. Falling onto her shoulders, it frames perfectly a white face, beautiful in all its features, into which are set eyes of perfect blue. Her dress is pitch-black, an able match to her hair, and it falls full to the ground. Around her waist is a belt of rich silver, from which gleams light brighter than the moon. To her side hangs a black and silver scabbard, but in it I can see no sword.

Motioning for the others to stay back, I walk to within fifteen feet of her. Feeling suddenly that she means me no harm, I lay my sword on the ground between us and hold out my right hand to her. She smiles and walks forward. She reaches her hand towards mine, and quickly our hands touch.

Cold. Her hand is cold. Like frost. I draw mine away, but I replace it when I see she has not moved. She has offered me a kind of trust. I dare not refuse.

"Who are you?" I whisper, my voice trembling with fright and awe.

"I will not tell," echoes her reply. Somehow I was expecting that. "While we talk, you will decide who I am. If you do, you will find me grateful. If not, you shall lose

nothing." She pauses, then looks into my eyes. "Who are you?" she insists, and I know I cannot resist her.

I tell her all. I don't want to, but I can't help myself. She has not trusted me to tell me of her, but for some reason, that doesn't matter to me. All that matters is that this woman, if woman she truly is, wants to know about me. Whatever her reasons, I accept them fully. After several minutes I have finished my story, and for a time nothing is said between us at all.

It is she who breaks the silence. "Derek," she begins, "your story moves me. Like you, I deeply regret your father's death. But I do not share your feelings about Corwin. Even in my present state he means much to me, and I will not willingly denigrate him. I wish that you would not do so, either."

"I'm sorry," I mumble. "His story seems so—"

"What it seems and what it might be are two different things, Derek. Your uncle is many things, and I have seen most of them, but I have never known him to be a liar. Not to himself, at any rate. He had no love for your father, but I do not believe he wanted him to die. His chronicles imply as much."

I cut in. "They do more than imply it. They say it. But why should that matter? If Corwin is lying, he'll lie about that, too. You can't defend Corwin's story in terms that apply only to Corwin's story. That's circular logic."

Obviously bemused, the woman replies, "Logic? What place has logic in all this? You believe a story about people who can alter reality as they see fit, who can re-create the universe practically at will, simply by walking a pattern that is every bit as metaphysical as it is physical, a story about a unicorn who decides on the succession to the most important throne of all, a story about a road that cuts through any semblance of sense that exists: you believe a story like that, and yet you still insist on logic? Do I shame you if I call such an insistence slightly ridiculous?" Her smile is mocking, but it is not cruel.

Not especially adept at thinking on my feet, I take a few seconds to respond. "Okay," I say, "maybe logic isn't the right word. But the fact remains that I'm here, and for me that makes this place, this whole episode, logical and true. I believe what I see."

She nods. "If it comes to that, I could even argue against your being here. But there's little point, since our senses really are all we have to go on, even if they're wrong ninety percent of the time. Still, I think you would do well to consider the source of your grievance, the *Chronicles of Amber* as told by Corwin Prince of Amber, and decide whether or not you believe them or not. I do not think you know."

Sucking my teeth, I nod slowly. She's right, of course. I've been extremely quick to deny the truth of Corwin's account of my father's death, but I've accepted practically everything else in the *Chronicles*. I've accepted, for instance, the fact that the Black Road links Amber and Chaos, and that by following it you can get to one or the other. Besides this, I've accepted, without hesitation, the ability of the princes of Amber to alter their surroundings, without even considering the possibility that what Corwin was really describing was the tendency for the senses to mislead, the tendency for us not to look past the senses in an attempt to get at reality. Suddenly, I want to look past my own senses, to see if this woman is really there.

I can't. I can't alter anything. I'm not an Amberite, even if my father was.

For a moment I stare at her in silence. A slight breeze blows through her long, black hair, but her blue eyes do not flinch as the hair sweeps into them. Never wavering, she returns my stare.

Finally I speak again. "Who are you?" I repeat, and this time she seems about to tell me. Before she does, though, she stops.

"Soon you will want to guess that for yourself," she says cryptically. "For now, let me explain something to you."

"Corwin was not lying about anything in his Chronicles. Of that I am certain. Still, at the same time, he did not know the entire truth. He did not know, nor has he yet appreciated, what your father did for Amber during all the years Corwin was away. Nor does he appreciate the role played by Oberon, your grandfather, in the events leading to your father's death. Eric was not the world's nicest guy, but neither was he the malevolent despot Corwin once claimed. Oberon gave up the throne, but he did not want to give it up to Eric. He wanted Corwin to have it, because Corwin was the son most like himself. Corwin was—and as far as I know, still is—the very image of his father, in temperament and intellect, if not in appearance.

"Eric, on the other hand, was the son of his mother.

"If you seek revenge for your father's death, I do not think you will find it. The story is much too complicated to be taken apart as easily as you seem to think you can. Years, decades, centuries of plotting, scheming, praying, fighting, all contributed to the Chronicles, and not just Corwin and Eric were doing the work. Oberon, Dworkin, Brand, all the brothers and all the sisters, with helpers from various Shadows thrown in for balance—all these people made the story happen. You cannot simply unravel that plot, Derek, because it is not to be unraveled.

"If you want my advice, you will make peace with Random. Through him you may find Corwin. If you do, deal with him as you will, but give him a chance. Do not stab him in the back. You would not succeed, and the attempt would mean your death. He is not a stupid man, nor is he ignoble. He deserves your respect."

With those words she pauses. The light of dawn begins to show over the horizon, a horizon of hills that roll higher now than those we have just come from. Something about her may be making this happen. Things seem to be changing.

"You may now guess my name, Derek," she says, cutting through my thoughts. "Take your time. If you guess correctly, I will thank you. If not, then I will simply wish

you luck on your travels. Either way, I will leave as soon as you make your guess."

My God! Who is she? I wish now I'd paid more attention to the other people in Corwin's story. Is she from Amber? From Chaos? Suddenly I long for a copy of the book, so that I might look for clues. She looks somehow familiar, as if I've read about her, but I must rack my brain to think of who she is. I must guess, and I want to guess right.

To figure out who this woman is, you will need to have read Nine Princes in Amber. Once you decide, refer to the table below. Beside each letter of the alphabet is a number. Spell the woman's name, and beside each letter place the corresponding number. Then add up all the numbers to come up with a total. Add 3 to this total. This final figure is the number of the section to which you should now turn.

As an example, say you guessed her name was Hilda (it's not). H = 8, i = 9, l = 12, d = 4, a = 1. The total would be 34. You would turn to section 34.

If you are correct, continue reading from that section. The section itself will tell you if you are right. If the section you've turned to makes no sense, you've guessed wrong.

If you are incorrect, first recheck your addition. If still incorrect, turn to Section 53.

CONVERSION TABLE

A=1 B=2 C=3 D=4 E=5 F=6 G=7 H=8
I=9 J=10 K=11 L=12 M=13 N=14 O=15
P=16 Q=17 R=18 S=19 T=20 U=21 V=22
W=23 X=24 Y=25 Z=26.

— 26 —

I have no choice. There are too many of them, and we are too few and too tired. I raise my sword once, but I know there will be no force behind my swing. Perhaps we can take out one or two, but before more of them are gone, we will all be dead. With no hope in flight, and less in battle, I have only one chance left.

Surrender and hope for the best.

Dropping my sword, I raise my hands above my head. Seeing me, the others do the same. No one, not even Tom, is about to argue with me here. We've run out of choices. It's as simple as that.

The last thing I feel is a blow across the back of my head.

I awaken in chains, in a room without light. Wherever I am, it stinks, and if I had anything in my stomach, I'm sure I'd throw up. As it is, I must avoid fainting at the sheer reek of my surroundings. Human waste, animal waste, bodies in stages of decay, and God knows what else: these are only some of the smells that now make up my life. All I hear are rustlings, and what Chaos-spawned creature they represent I do not even want to guess.

Hours later I hear the creak of a door, and when I turn to the sound, the light from a small candle seems to burn my eyes. A guard, loathsome and deformed, places a tray at my feet. On it are bread, water, and some gruel that smells almost as foul as my cell. In the light I see two bodies lying motionless at the far end of my cell, and from the eye of one of them slithers something I can't begin to describe. My brain reels at my helplessness and my horror.

And here I wait. I wait for an end, or for a chance to escape. I think back to the escape of Corwin from the dungeons of Amber, and I laugh at my innocence then. How little I knew of the devices of torture. And Corwin

had to do without his eyes, had to live with the pain of feeling his eyes heal. I can't believe that I thought him weak, a sniveling coward with no real reason to be alive. He would eventually kill my father, I knew that then, and I wanted only for him to suffer. Well, he did, and now I understand part of it.

I wait, too, for the chance to find out about my father. But I realize now that it may not happen. When all is said and done, this seems as likely a place as any for me to spend the rest of my life. I have surrendered, but I have not gained.

Turn to Section 29.

— 27 —

"Now!" I scream again. "Now!"

For a moment nothing happens, but at last Stan McManus shakes his head and strides forward. Another joins him, and finally another. But the others are still reluctant, rooted to their place. I call them one last time, but before I can see what they do, I must turn and fight. The black creatures have closed to within striking range.

Roll one six-sided die. The result is the number of men who flee from Derek's side. Subtract that number from the Manpower Value on the stats sheet. They are gone permanently.

If the result is a 6, subtract one from the Morale Value. This loss is permanent.

If Derek decides to surrender, turn to Section 26.

If he still decides to fight, knowing that he has lost men, use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle.

There are six black creatures. Since their Ordnance Value is 7, they have an initial Attack Strength of 42. They fight on Chart C. Derek's men fight on Chart B. As in all combats, Derek's men have the option of using their guns. If they do, however, they must put a '1' in the RAL box of the stats sheet. If there is already a total in the RAL box, just add 1 to it.

If Derek wins the battle, turn to Section 28.

If he loses, turn to Section 21.

— 28 —

I parry the first sword that slashes at me, and as I swing away from it, I manage to cut through the wrist that holds it. A minor victory, since the creature simply switches to another hand, but one that makes me realize these creatures can be beaten. "They bleed!" I shout at the top of my lungs, then steady my feet and swing once more. This time a hideous black head falls to the ground at my feet.

My heart pumps loudly now, and my spirits soar. I don't know what chance I have in this battle, but in some ways I don't care. No matter what the outcome, to have discovered at last this newfound joy I have, a joy in battle—in fighting for good—is worth even dying for. I swing my sword with strength, with confidence, with the knowledge that I will not be an easy victim for anyone or anything.

For Eric! my heart sings. *For Father!* And suddenly the face of my father, the face I have never seen but have long imagined, appears in my mind as I fight. The face is grim, and it is sad. But to me it looks proud as well, proud of the son who fights in his place, and that, too, spurs me on. This battle may be my last, but it will not have been in vain. I have seen my father. He has seen me.

My strength renewed, I rush once more into the fight. My sword swings and another foe falls. Beside me, Tom thrusts through the lungs of another, and beside him Stan McManus, suddenly as strong a man as I could hope for, cuts through the legs of a third. Black blood flows onto the charred grass, killing it forever but giving us hope. Only two remain, and there are enough of us.

In the end Tom and I split the take. He beheads one while I stab the other through the heart. He rushes towards me and, reeking with black blood, we grasp each other's hands, laughing in the sudden glory of the win. We hadn't expected to win, even less to enjoy it.

And then at last we fall to the ground, and for hours into the night we sleep the rest of the exhausted. When we awake, close to dawn, the choice is before us once again: to go east towards Amber, or to continue west towards Chaos. We have won once; we may not do so again.

If Derek turns east towards Amber, turn to Section 22.

If he continues towards Chaos, turn to Section 24.

— 29 —

You have reached one possible ending of Black Road to Amber. If you want to restart the book, you may do so. If you want to begin again from a particular point, retrace your steps until you reach that spot. Be careful, though, that you don't inadvertently read a section you have never come to before. To avoid this problem, and because the book contains scenes you have not likely encountered, we recommend rereading the book from the start, trying some of the paths you did not try the first time. Whichever you choose, good luck.

— 30 —

I look at the others, and their eyes say the same as mine. There is, in fact, no choice. If we run, we will surely die. If we surrender, we will probably die. If we fight, well, everyone has the right for a miracle now and again.

As one we draw forth our weapons and watch as the flames approach. Once the beings reach this side of the Road, the flames drop from them, but their golden skin now shines with the heat of the flame. And the eyes are filled with fire, and in the fire we read only hatred. Ten of them march towards us, and we have so few to face them.

Use the combat rules to determine the victor. There are ten fire-beings, with an Ordnance of 8. They fight on Chart C. Derek's men also fight on Chan C, lower than before because they are exhausted. Guns do not work on the fire-beings.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 31.

If Derek loses, turn to Section 58.

— 31 —

The heat sears through us as arrows begin to fly. They burn with flame, these arrows, and the flame does not die when the arrows strike the ground. Even when they do not strike us directly, still they lie on the ground and wait for one of us, unsuspecting, to step on them while backing away from an attack. Whatever concentration we might have had is lost, as we must focus not only on our foes, but also on the tongues of flame they have already fired.

I swing hard and strike one of them. It falls to the ground, and I pull out my sword. It is hot, and my arm is hot as well. It barely responds to my command that it strike again.

Finally it obeys, but I am almost too late. Still, something in me keeps me fighting, and I parry a bloodred sword as I leap from the path of a flaming arrow. Exhausted as I am, I can scarcely will my body to move, but so far I have not died. I'm not sure why; I am simply grateful.

And now a fury rises within me, a fury and a rage to stay alive. Perhaps I will not live for much longer, but I finally believe I need not die here. I swing my sword again and again, paying almost no attention to the damage it does or the fatigue in my arms. Like a windmill I whirl, the sword protecting me from all foes. At last it is over, the enemies spent and my strength gone, and as I fall to the ground, I look to see the field around me littered with golden corpses.

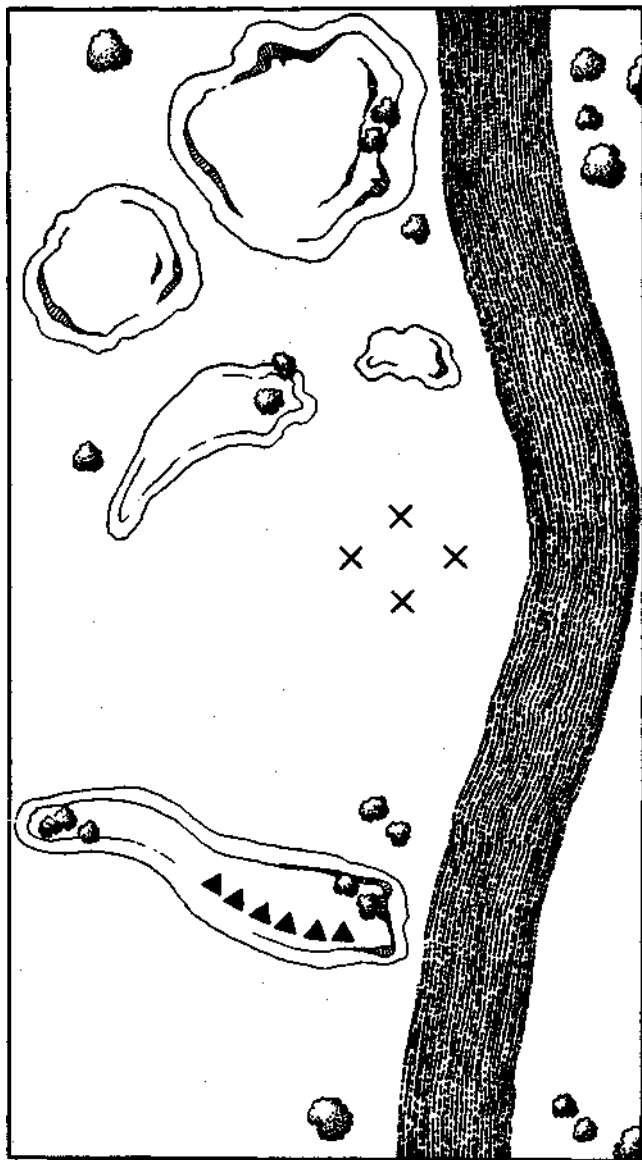
When I awaken, I am surrounded by men in dark blue robes. I can see nothing of their faces or their bodies, only the robes that cover them almost complete. "Surrender," one of them says, extending his hand towards me.

They have no weapons in sight, but I realize that I have no chance at escape. They have asked me to surrender. I will do so. I know no other choice.

Turn to Section 26.

— 32 —

So we follow the Black Road. Winding endlessly, it heads east for as far as the eye can see. In the fields that surround it, nothing grows, but within a hundred feet of the road, green grass struggles to survive. Turning, I look westwards, where the road drives straight into an ominous



haze. Here, there is no haze, but neither is there much life. The air is still, and the sun is hot.

Even so, not all is oppressive. The sun's shine gleams off the Road, which responds with a kaleidoscope of unexpected color. Golds, whites, reds, blues, crimsons, and bright greens all flash from the black surface, each as beautiful as the next, each with its own promise of some kind of progress. Progress isn't everything, but it's a whole lot better than stagnation.

But then the colors change. Suddenly the golds and whites become browns and blacks, and the greens fade and the red deepens to blood. Shining no longer, the Road now emits its colors, as the colors begin to throb rather than glint from the surface. I listen to the throb, and I hear the rhythm of a heart.

A human heart.

My heart.

Turning to my right, I begin to walk towards the Road. I have no choice. It has called me.

Suddenly I feel a hand on my left arm and another on my right. Jerking my head in both directions, I see two loathesome creatures clutching me, keeping me from moving farther. Spitting at them, I struggle to break free.

Hard as I fight, though, they will not let go. I stare into the face of one, and its teeth bare as it hisses into my face. On the other I see a grin truly evil, and I see as well hatred and murder flaring from its eyes. One last time I struggle, and then I drop to my knees and scream.

Thoughts swirl in my brain, nightmares and visions, dreams of blackness and death and the putrescence of decaying flesh. I see armies clashing in the barren fields, and I see men falling as they die. But then I see myself, and I am wearing a crown and sitting on a throne that looks like gold, and around me are people of all races and backgrounds, swearing either servitude or fealty. And kneeling before me are the princes of Amber.

Julian, Caine, Bleys, Gerard, Benedict. Random with tears in his eyes, crying for the crown that I now wear. Only two are missing. Corwin is not here. Nor is Brand. To the others I vow, in a voice stronger than my own, that I will find them.

And then my face burns hot, and colors dance in my eyes, and light burns and dies and burns and dies once more. Forcing open my eyes, I see, staring into my face, its fury strong and deadly, the face of Brand. His hand rises to strike, its palm descending onto my cheek. I scream as I feel his nails scrape my skin. All is black.

I wake to the feel of water washing over my face. Branko Verdi kneels above me, washing me with a cool, wet cloth, humming to himself a song I've never heard. Concentrating on his music, he doesn't see when I open my eyes.

"Something Italian?" I ask, and at the sound of my voice Branko jumps back. I smile, but it hurts.

"Vivaldi, actually," he says. "From the *Four Seasons*. Don't you recognize it?" He looks astonished when I shake my head. "I couldn't help wondering, while looking at the Black Road, whether or not this place actually has four seasons. That's why the tune came to me, I guess. Besides, I've studiously avoided learning to hum Verdi. It would be too self-indulgent."

He washes my face once more, then continues, "How are you, Derek? It's good to hear you speak."

I grimace. "My face hurts." I expect him to return the punch line, *It gives me a pain, too*, but when he doesn't, I figure he's never heard the joke. "What happened?" I ask.

"You turned towards the Black Road," Branko intones, "and Tom and I stopped you. You almost went crazy when that happened. We had to hold you down and slap you until you pulled out of it." He touches an extremely sensitive part of my cheek. "We're sorry, Derek. There was no other way."

So Tom and Verdi were the ugly creatures. Amazing

how the Road can change one's perceptions. "Who did the slapping?" I ask, an idea suddenly entering my mind.

"Tom," Verdi announces without hesitation.

Tom. And I thought he was Brand. That would make me Oberon, I suppose. Or maybe Dworkin. Hell, maybe even Flora. This is weird.

When I rise to a sitting position, Branko tries to push me back down. "Not yet, Derek," he says. "You need more rest."

"I'm okay," I insist, as pleasantly as possible. "I really am. A bit groggy, but nothing that a good pizza wouldn't solve. With a nice, cold beer." I don't really like beer, because it tastes like leather, but talking about beer and pizza always gets the desired results.

"You're right," smiles Branko. "If you can think about pizza and beer, neither of which I like at all, then you must be fine. Stay there. I'll get Tom." If I ever doubted it before, it's becoming more and more obvious that Tom is the undisputed leader of this group. I'm paying them, but he calls the shots. Well, that's okay. I won't say I can't use the help. And Tom always seems to know what to do. I like that, even if it amazes me somewhat.

After a rest and a short meal, we gather to make plans. There is little conversation, and what there is sticks pretty well to the obvious. Among us all is a feeling that we've bitten off somewhat more than we can possibly chew, but we all know that there's little to be done about it. We can't turn back west, and we have no way of returning to Toronto. Quite clearly, the only direction is forward. To the east. To Amber.

And with the Black Road watching over us, I don't even know if it will do any good to proceed with caution. Something tells me that our presence is already a thing of widely-held knowledge among Amberites everywhere. The Road goes on and on, and wherever it goes, it carries with it every bit of news it can hold. It may even carry our thoughts.

"Even so," says Tom when I tell him this, "I think we

should travel at night. I feel rather open here. There's no point having something find us that wouldn't normally find us. If the Road gives us away, fine, but let's not have some farmer get at us."

Good point, we all concede. Besides, I say only to myself, who wants to sleep in the dark with that black thing running along beside us? I somehow doubt that it sleeps at night. Or any other time, for that matter.

In the three hours left before dark, we try to sleep. We don't bother posting a guard, since none of us really expects to drift off. Here at last on the road to Amber, finally about to accomplish something (even if we don't know what), we are simply too excited. Excited, frightened, and filled with thought.

What the others are thinking I do not know. I can't even begin to guess. In all likelihood, they are wondering at what lies ahead, or reliving what has gone before. If some of them have been here before—which with every hour seems both more possible and less likely—then perhaps they are remembering their Amberian past, a time filled with intrigue, battle, uncertainty. If not, maybe they are looking towards the future. A future which, it seems increasingly possible, may not happen at all.

As for me, I spend the hours hoping that what I've done isn't wrong. Not just wrong for me, although that's certainly part of it, but wrong for the others as well. They are mercenaries—paid assassins, if need be—but they are human beings, and some of them have almost become my friends. For better or for worse, if Tom were to die right now, I would be extremely sad. I'd be almost as sad if Stan or Branko were to go instead. And so on down the line.

Eric. My father. For him I have come this far, and for him I will go further. I don't know if Tom's story about working for Brand is true in any way, but since it's unlikely he would bother lying so profoundly, I can only assume it is. If that's the case, then I wonder what he thinks of my mission. He has said nothing to suggest he

either supports it or thinks it stupid, but both attitudes are equally possible. If Corwin's books were right, then Brand and Eric were not amicable, and Tom and I may yet have a problem. I don't know how much he supports Brand, but from all indications, he was (is?) fairly loyal.

I wonder, too, at the wisdom of my coming here at all. While I was sitting in my living room in Toronto, furiously reading Corwin's account of the murder of my father, it was easy to be passionate about it, to want everything to work out to my, and Dad's, benefit. I was comfortable there, with a baseball game on the radio and a bag of potato chips beside me on the couch. Here, though, it's different. I am hot, filthy, hungry for something half decent, scared of the Black Road, frightened of and anxious about what I must do next. For I don't really know exactly what that thing is. As a group we've decided to follow the Black Road, but as that group's leader, I must soon decide where all this is supposed to lead. Not the Road, that is, but rather our actions. We march towards nowhere in particular, and that is the worst destination of all.

With all these thoughts swirling in my head, I doze but do not sleep. When I open my eyes, though, the dusk is almost full. Night hovers ominously over the Black Road.

Our first march is long: seven miles perhaps, all without a break. We stop to eat, but we do not linger for long. The Black Road is too close for that, much too close, and we want to cover as much distance as possible while we are all still healthy. Who knows how long that will last?

Another march, and finally another stop. My feet throb with the warning signs of blisters about to rise. I am hungry, far hungrier than our meager provisions allow me to satisfy, and my stomach is churning. I feel nauseous.

Running my fingers through my hair, I press my head against my hand to try to stop the pain. This is no time to be sick, I think to myself, and in fact sick isn't exactly what I am. I have a headache, the kind I usually have when I sleep for too long, the kind that is always accompa-

nied by a stomach that wants to spill itself from both ends. Maybe the food is bad, maybe the water. Maybe the Black Road is tainting the air.

Stan, too, appears white. Staring at the ground as we sit, he looks as if he doesn't want to move at all. Branko lies back with his head in his hands, and Tom paces rather than sits, and neither of them looks anything other than ordinary. But Stan, like me, seems ill.

Shifting my weight rather than standing up and walking, I eventually slide over to him. "Anything wrong?" I ask, not particularly hopeful of an honest answer. "You appear less than good."

Looking at me, Stan simply shakes his head. "Nothing much," he tries to assure me. "My stomach's just a little gone, that's all."

"What do you mean by 'gone'?" comes my inevitable question.

"Gone. Not right. Ready to toss my cookies. Sick, I guess, if you want me to use the technical terminology." He's trying to be funny, I realize, but he is succeeding far more at sounding annoyed. This, too, I recognize. It comes from forcing the answer too much.

After a moment I ask, "Anything to do with the food?" When he shakes his head, I continue, "How about the Road? I don't feel very well myself, and I wonder if it's got something to do with the Road."

Scratching his chin, he looks at me and replies, "Could be. I hadn't thought about that." After another silence he says, "Yeah, it really could be. It stinks, doesn't it?"

Yes. It stinks. It emits an odor, a kind of cross between sulfur and tar, the kind of smell that forces the body to react. Somehow, I decide immediately, we've got to get farther away from it. Cut north a bit, then east. Cut back every so often to make sure we haven't lost the Road completely.

I give the order, and that's what we do. Immediately my head clears, my stomach with it. Stan, too, appears a little better, though something still seems to be upsetting him.

Knowing enough not to press the issue, however, I leave him alone as we continue our march.

The night goes on, seemingly forever. I don't know how far we've marched, but it seems like hours. Yet when I look at the moon, it appears no farther down in the sky than before, and every landmark I can find seems to have drawn no closer whatsoever. Somehow we seem to be covering no ground at all.

But suddenly, from over the hill that sprawls before us, we hear voices. Mumbling, secretive, plotting voices, voices neither expecting nor wanting to be discovered. We stop dead, listening. Motioning the others to stay back, I drop to my knees, crawl to the top of the hill and peer over the top.

Below me, less than twenty yards away, three dark figures huddle together. Their voices are low, and for a time I don't recognize their language. They sit in a circle, and they are covered with cloaks. I can't make out their shapes.

Then one of them points towards me. For a second I am terrified, thinking he is pointing directly at me, but then I realize he is simply signaling a direction. Even so, I try to bury myself in the ground as he begins to speak, and so I miss his first words.

"... must be killed. I do not know how he knows of them, but he seems to want them, and that must not be. My orders are to keep him imprisoned at all times, to keep him from everything he wants. Whoever the intruders are, they must not reach him."

Intruders? Who? Us?

A second one speaks, but I can't hear. Then the first resumes his speech. "I have been told. That is how I know. Others are finding information." And with that he points towards the Road. In our march we have moved back beside it, for I see it now glinting silver and black in the light of the descending moon. It shimmers, and it makes me afraid.

And then, out of the Road, a black figure rises. Cloaked

from head to foot, tall and broad, it glows faintly with blue as it rises, then almost disappears into the darkness as it steps from the Road. Towards the huddle the figure walks, and it joins them and sits in their circle. Now there are four.

"Others will come," it says, its voice deep, rough, hoarse. "The strangers are close. The Road has kept watch."

Oh boy. So I was right. The Road is more than just an ordinary road. It even does its own spying. And if it needs protection, it just sprouts another bodyguard. This won't be easy.

We have to get by these four. Now. I don't want to wait until there are five. Or even more. It looks like we have a bit of a jump on them. If we're going to attack, this is the time.

Crawling backwards, I reach the others. In a few seconds I relate the entire incident then hastily order the attack. Before anyone moves, though, Tom grabs my arm.

"Maybe we should try to sneak past them," he whispers. "If they're waiting for further word, it shouldn't be too hard. We don't know anything about them."

He's right, of course. I should have thought of that. Perhaps there's no need for us to attack at all. Then again, if we don't attack, they and their friends might find us later. For a second I look to the ground, not quite sure what to do.

Look at the map at the beginning of this Section, which details the positions of Derek's men and the enemy. If you decide to attack, you will need this map further. For now, it may help you decide whether or not to assault.

If Derek decides to launch an attack, turn to Section 57.

If he tries to steal past, turn to Section 40.

— 33 —

Digging my fingers into the dry, crumbling ground, I drag myself over the top of the hill. Again and again I lift my hand carefully, ever so slowly, and jam it again hard into the brittle earth. Within seconds I can feel the fingernails tearing slightly away from my fingers. As dirt enters them, I grimace in pain.

I swear that the moon is shining more brightly than it was before, and I curse it. I curse the black power that made the ground as dry and useless as it is, and I curse the easy life that made me as weak and unfit as I am. I curse, too, the power of Katyrina Emerson, because she was able to send me here, and I curse Corwin son of Oberon for forcing me here at all. Most of all, however, I curse myself. I realize now that I am stupid beyond belief.

The only person I don't curse is my father. He alone keeps me going, keeps me digging my fingers once more into a ground now stained with my blood.

I hear a shout. Then something walking towards me. Then silence. Finally what sounds like an all-clear. All this time I have lain totally still, my heart drumming in my temples and my face buried in the stinking ground. Terrified, I breathe in the rank scent of the dead grass. In this moment I understand what hate means.

But then, suddenly, I am across. To my right is the hill that we saw from the other side. I cannot see past it, and no one can see past it to me. Safe, at least for the time, I pull myself farther behind the hill and sit up. Signaling for the next man to begin, I lie on my back to keep myself from vomiting. All I want, this very minute, is to be home in bed.

In what seems a short time, I am joined by one of the others. I don't bother to look at him, because I can feel his unwillingness to communicate. Another joins us after that,

and still none of us has spoken. Alone with ourselves, we are afraid to let anyone else in.

Suddenly I hear a shout, then a second, and finally a scream. Peering out from behind the hill as cautiously as I can, I see two of the robed creatures bending over a body no more than fifteen feet away. Pointing to where we came from, and then to where we are, they rush towards me and motion for others to follow. It's up. They spotted us. I wonder which one of us screwed up.

Turn to Section 35.

— 34 —

But they are soldiers trained, and in superb condition. Their weapons are drawn and ready before we are half of the distance between us, the shock at our attack quickly dulled into battle rage. They stand, not shoulder to shoulder, as I had half expected, but a good double arms' length apart, each unhampered by the next's reach with sword and axe, yet an impenetrable wall to protect the tent into which I must have access. I remind myself desperately that no one claimed this would be easy.

It is the spears that unnerve me most. Their reach is too long to allow us to close with the guard, their movement too agile to easily evade. I see McManus swing his sword across one like an axe, but the shaft is not so easily broken, and it takes him several bone-jarring blows to splinter through the thing.

Fire sings along my side as the guard I face connects a thrust. Fortunately the spear head just grazes my skin, but the force of the blow rips a gaping hole in my tunic, and the flapping leather is a distraction. We must eliminate the spears!

Then to my left I hear the sharp report of a gun. Dorcy McCrimmon has drawn his weapon and fires it at the

provost guard he battles. Perhaps that will turn the tide. As I shout to the others to use their guns, I see that my order comes too late. McManus bellows as the guard drives the splintered stump of spear deep into his torso. Others have fallen, too, to spear and axe, and I cannot tell if they will ever rise.

The shock of my decimated force staggers me, and the ache of my twisted wrist hampers my movement. Before I can draw my gun, another spear thrust connects, and not glancingly. It seems seconds before I realize that all of that blood is mine. My last thought in the blackness is that Amber protects its own far too well.

Turn to Section 29.

— 35 —

Use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle. The robed figures consist of four people, and they are armed with swords and knives that give them an Ordnance Value of 5. Their initial Attack Strength, therefore, is 20. The robed figures fight on Chart C. Derek's men fight on Chart D.

If Derek's men win the battle, turn to Section 39.

If Derek's men lose, turn to Section 42.

— 36 —

The only possible entrance to this section is from Section 74. If you have come here from any other section in the book, return to that section and choose again.

"Yes, Derek," the man whispers as he smiles. "You

have found me. We meet at last, after all these long years. I have prayed that you might be alive."

I walk towards him, and he moves to embrace me. When he puts his arms around me, for a time I feel nothing. But slowly I feel the pressure of his strong arms surround me, and hesitating for only a moment, I return the embrace. This is my father. The father I have never known.

When we drop our hold, his eyes fill with tears. "I have little time, Derek, so you must listen. Listen closely. You must do as I tell you.

"Before you, an army fights to defend a portion of the Black Road. In that spot of the Road, carved deeply into it, lies a new version of the Great Pattern of Amber. You must walk the Pattern, Derek. You must walk it alone.

"Should anyone attempt to help you—anyone at all—you must refuse them. Julian will try, but his battles will occupy him long enough for you to begin. Caine will try as well. Perhaps even Brand will try. But, if you are to succeed, you must walk the Pattern alone.

"If you complete the Pattern, you will be able to go anywhere you please. To complete your quest, however, you must go to only one place. You must wish yourself on to the throne of Amber. Only there will you attract the power you need to meet, to question—to threaten if need be—the people you seek. Go anywhere else, and you are lost. Join this battle, and you will be slain. Do only as I have told you."

And then suddenly his mouth contorts, and his eyes burn with fire, and his face screams soundlessly with pain. Spastically, he shakes and trembles, dropping on his knees to the ground. Rising slowly, he raises his right hand and points behind me. I turn around and look into Tom's face.

"Do not trust him, Derek," my father says, his voice now solid, deep, commanding. "Do not trust him. And do not walk the Pattern alone. If you do," his voice gasps, "if you do, you will die, and Amber with you. No one," and now his voice is nothing but a rasp, "no one can walk

a Black Road Pattern by himself. He needs ... he needs" Fighting, struggling, clutching at his throat, his face red with blood and his eyes rolled back in his head, Eric of Amber speaks his last words. "He ... needs ... a ... true ... Prince ... of ... the ... Blood. ... And ... if ... you ... reach ... the ... center ... ask ... only ... to ... go ... home. ... Amber ... is ... not ... your—" He collapses, then fades from sight.

For a long time I stand where he was, feeling again his lonely embrace and letting the tears wash down my face. When I am finished, I look up and see Tom beside me, reaching out to comfort me. Caught between gratitude and sudden revulsion, I back away and look into his eyes.

"Who are you, Torn?" I ask, but he merely shakes his head and says nothing. My mind is whirling with emotion and advice. Which of his contradictory instructions did my Father mean? And why not trust Tom? I have my own doubts about him; what could my Father, Eric of Amber, know of my hired mercenaries?

If Derek decides to walk the Pattern by himself, turn to Section 75.

If he decides to join the battle, turn to Section 83.

— 37 —

I curse myself, long and low, for betraying our presence, for the foolish plan, for the absurdity of our coming to this land in the first place. I was going to capture Amber? Avenge my father? I cannot even manage a simple attack!

But my companions array themselves in good order against the provost guard, and the sight is heartening. Perhaps all is not lost before it is even begun.

My hand hangs useless from the injured wrist, but I will

deal with that inconvenience later. Although I have no faith in my sword-fighting capability thus unbalanced, I remember I have a trump: my gun from Toronto is still in my belt.

I draw the weapon and aim. Will it work in this place? The closer one is to Amber, the books say, the less chance of a projectile weapon firing. But we must be a sufficient distance away, as the gun bucks in my hand and a guard falls, surprise gurgling in the bright blood on his lips. The thought gives me scant comfort.

And the gun all too scanty protection. They are too well trained, these guards, and I cannot aim everywhere at once. My men fall before these experts even if I manage to hit a few, and my shots are not always clear ones.

An ominous click. I check the chamber frantically, no time to reload, no time left at all as the guard sees my hesitation and swings. The gun is no protection against his axe.

I feel a scream rise in my throat, and his blade falls to meet it.

Turn to Section 29.

— 38 —

"Across the Black Road," she tells me, "is a house filled with many things of value. In it you will find, if you are fortunate, everything you need to carry on with your journey. For you will need help to reach Amber, since you are not Amber-born.

"The house is small, and at night it is dark and frightening. But if you have the will to enter it, you will be able to do so. Inside you may well find what you are after."

Something about the way she says this makes me pause. Her reasoning seems sound, but she has already warned me against reason. I'll have to think about this. Besides,

I'm not sure I like the thought of crossing the Black Road.

"Now go in peace, and remember my words. Remember, too, your love for your father. His love was for Amber. So is Corwin's. Neither deserves injustice from anyone."

With those words she turns and disappears into the hills. As soon as she is gone, the dawn rises full above the hills.

From here several routes tempt me. To the east, as far as I know, lies my real destination, but perhaps she is right. Perhaps I can't get there without help. Still, I long to be on my way, and straight seems the best direction to go. Here, too, is another chance to turn around and head west. Maybe, just maybe, the road to Amber lies through Chaos.

If Derek decides to turn west, turn to Section 13.

If he heads across the Black Road to look for the house, turn to Section 63.

If he decides to continue eastwards to Amber, turn to Section 55.

— 39 —

Under attack, the figures reach for a clasp at their throats and drop their robes to the ground. What is revealed beneath is both comforting and frightening.

They are men, men with skin that glows faintly orange in the moonlight. What color they are in daylight, I can't guess, but right now I have no time to figure it out. The comforting part, though, is that they are not big men. The robes themselves are obviously padded, giving the illusion of strength that simply isn't there. Less comforting, however, is one simple fact. Their faces are only partly human.

The other part, as far as I can tell, is wolf. Just below the eyes, partway down the nose, the faces flare into a

point, and the end of the nose and the mouth resemble those of a wolf. Their teeth are dog's teeth, their tongues dog's tongues, their necks covered with long, gray hair. Nowhere else on their bodies, unless that part is covered by their clothes, do these men look like wolves. Only the bottom half of the face, but that is all they need.

I have seen paintings of werewolves, and I have seen representations of werewolves by Hollywood makeup artists. Even at their most imaginative, however, even when their thoughts have turned to the most grisly representation imaginable, Hollywood has never, at any time, created a face as ghastly as these. Horrible they are, mutated only enough to remind me that they once might have looked normal; they are not hideous, but dreadful. They invoke pity at the same time they invoke fear. Pity because they might once have been like me, fear because I might one day be like them.

As they approach, I instinctively shrink from them. Some draw knives, others draw short pointed swords, but so great is my reaction to them that I can scarcely find the courage to wield my sword against them. Still, I must, and so I hold the sword in front of me as our lines close.

At the legs of my foe I swing, but he is fast and I draw only a sliver of blood. His sword stings mine in return, and I feel a thin stream of blood on my hand and parry a second and then a third attempt. Seeing an opening, I lunge towards his chest, but he dances back nearly with ease and almost swipes my sword from my grasp. I must become more serious, I realize, and I step back to take a breath.

Suddenly he charges at me, and I am almost not ready. But I plant my feet in time to deflect his near-desperate swing, and as he rushes past me I manage to trip him to the ground. Like a cat I pounce on him, holding his hair with one hand and my sword at his throat with the other. Slowly I bend back his neck, until I see his grotesque face offer some sort of indescribably ugly smile. In my revulsion, all I can see is that sickening nose and mouth.

Towards it my sword now swings. I fear him, and I pity him, but I know that I must not let him live. He is a creature of the Black Road, and all its creatures must die.

I know that now. I feel it in my soul.

My arm is raised. I close my eyes and prepare to swing. I feel my sword slice through the air as it descends, then I hear it cut through the bone of my enemy's face. A faint scream, perhaps closer to a hiss, escapes him as he dies, and I drop his head to the ground.

Turning away so I will not vomit, I look around me. My comrades, too, are grim, and some of them even sob. We have won, but we are anything but proud.

Dispirited, I look to the east and despise what I see. Turning, I look to the west and fear what lies there. Again the choice lies before me, and again I must think before I can act.

If Derek decides to turn west, towards Chaos, turn to Section 13.

If he decides to continue east towards Amber, turn to Section 25.

— 40 —

Tom's right. It's pointless to fight when we can go on without. If we fight, we may lose. If we get past, though, we can put considerable distance between us and them by the time they know we're through. Of course, if they spot us, we fight anyway.

As far away from the Black Road as possible we crawl, until we come to a patch of grass near where the hill levels out. If we go any farther, we might be seen in the open field. Here we can stay hidden until we are ready to move. Across a small valley, no more than forty yards away, is a higher hill. If we make it to there, we should be out of danger.



I decide we will *try* this one by one. I will lead, dragging myself across the valley and onto the far hill. The others will follow behind me, with Tom bringing up the rear. If we're spotted, we fight. If not, we'll figure out what to do once we're all across.

Roll two six-sided dice and read the result. If the result is less or equal to the Stealth rating of Derek's men (9), turn to Section 43.

If the result is greater than 9, turn to Section 33.

— 41 —

The only entrance to this section is from Section 87. If you have arrived here from any other section, turn back to that section and make another choice.

I know now who he is. His appearance, his manner, everything about him I have seen so far: they all give him away. Even the fact that I have trusted him so long is solid evidence.

Brand.

The most neurotic brother of them all. The man who tried to destroy Amber and remake it in his own image. The man who wanted to be a god.

And now he stands before me, smiling the smile of a torturer.

"You are Brand," I say at last, my voice a whispered note of resignation.

"Yes, Derek," he replies. "I am Brand. Although, I have to admit, I liked being Tom. Too bad it had to end. We really did get along quite well." His smile drips with malice.

"In a minute, Derek, I will send you back to your home. You will never, at any time in your life or your death, be able to return to Amber. Nor, in fact, will you remember

anything that has transpired. You will simply wake up in your bed and carry on your life as you did before you began this insane quest.

"I will tell you only this before you go: you have proven yourself an excellent warrior, and a courageous man. I respect you as well as I have respected anyone. Given time, I could even have liked you. But you are wrong about Corwin. I hate him, and I want only to see him dead, but he is not a murderer. He did not kill your father. Your father died trying to protect Amber from me. For that he deserved to die, just as he deserves your respect.

"Now go. I will not wish you well, because your life will be filled with sorrow. I am king of Amber now. Amber, and all other Shadows, must be remade."

Brand holds out towards me a shining card. Green and blue and brown it is, with an endlessly changing pattern that throbs and pulses. I hesitate at first, but when he thrusts it towards me again, I reach out my hand and touch it.

When I awaken, it is morning. For a moment I do not know where I am, but then I feel an old pillow beneath my head and a thin blanket on top of me. Around me I see the unfamiliar trappings of a strange, rundown bedroom, its reek of urine and old paint penetrating my brain. The wallpaper is splattered with vomit, and the floor is sticky.

Rising, I throw on my clothes and leave without showering or eating. I descend the three flights of steps to the first floor, open the door, and step out into teeming rain. A short walk takes me to a coffee shop, where I order a large coffee and two doughnuts as my breakfast. Setting them in my booth, I step outside to buy a newspaper.

The Blue Jays lost. It figures. Barfield struck out again, as he has done many times lately. That just about sinks it, as far as I'm concerned. The Jays will never get back in it now. Nor is the other news much better. The stock market continues its decline, another arms summit has broken off, and there's a threat of another goddamned postal strike.

A black man walks up to me and asks to see the paper.

When I give it to him, he opens the entertainment section and yelps with joy. "Hey, man!" he shouts at me, even though I am only a couple feet away from him. "It's true what I heard. Aretha, man. Coming to Toronto. And playing a club, not the Gardens. Unbelievable, man. I mean, I ain't seen her in years."

Then he looks at me, the smile wide across his face. "You goin', man? You want to go up now and get tickets?"

Slowly I shake my head. "No thanks. I don't think so. To tell you the truth, I don't even like Aretha. I like someone a little mellower. A little smoother."

"Smoother?" he shouts. "Smoother? Shit, man, ain't you got no soul?"

I am about to defend myself, but then I think back to all that has happened. I snicker, a laugh of ironic self-contempt.

"Soul?" I say to my new acquaintance. "No. I guess I haven't."

Turn to Section 29.

— 42 —

Under attack, the figures reach for a clasp at their throats and drop their robes to the ground. What is revealed beneath is both comforting and frightening.

They are men, men with skin that glows faintly orange in the moonlight. What color they are in daylight, I can't guess, but right now I have no time to figure it out. The comforting part, though, is that they are not big men. The robes themselves are obviously padded, giving the illusion of strength that simply isn't there. Less comforting, however, is one simple fact. Their faces are only partly human.

The other part, as far as I can tell, is wolf. Just below the eyes, partway down the nose, the faces flare into a point, and the end of the nose and the mouth resemble those of a wolf. Their teeth are dog's teeth, their tongues

Section 42

dog's tongues, their necks coveted with long, gray hair. Nowhere else on their bodies, unless that part is covered by their clothes, do these men look like wolves. Only the bottom half of the face, but that is all they need.

I have seen paintings of werewolves, and I have seen representations of werewolves by Hollywood makeup artists. Even at their most imaginative, however, even when their thoughts have turned to the most grisly representation imaginable, Hollywood has never, at any time, created a face as ghastly as these. Horrible they are, mutated only enough to remind me that they once might have looked normal, they are not hideous, but dreadful. They invoke pity at the same time they invoke fear. Pity because they might once have been like me, fear because I might one day be like them.

As they approach, I instinctively shrink from them. Some draw knives, others draw short pointed swords, but so great is my reaction to them that I can scarcely find the courage to wield my sword against them. Still, I must, and so I hold the sword in front of me as our lines close.

At the legs of my foe I swing, but he is fast and I draw only a sliver of blood. His sword stings mine in return, and I feel a thin stream of blood on my hand and parry a second and then a third attempt. Seeing an opening, I lunge towards his chest, but he dances back nearly with ease and almost swipes my sword from my grasp. I must become more serious, I realize, and I step back to take a breath.

Suddenly he charges at me, and I am almost not ready. But I plant my feet in time to deflect his near-desperate swing, and as he rushes past me, I manage to trip him to the ground. Like a cat I pounce on him, holding his hair with one hand and my sword at his throat with the other. Slowly I bend back his neck, until I see his grotesque face offer some sort of indescribably ugly smile. In my revulsion, all I can see is that sickening nose and mouth. Towards it my sword now swings. I fear him, and I pity

him, but I know that I must not let him live. He is a creature of the Black Road, and all its creatures must die.

I know that now. I feel it in my soul.

My arm is raised. I close my eyes and prepare to swing. But suddenly I feel a sharp, stinging pain in my back, and as the pain spreads to my chest I feel the thoughts in my head turn white. I scream and fall.

Turn to Section 29.

— 43 —

Digging my fingers into the dry, crumbling ground, I drag myself over the top of the hill. Again and again I lift my hand carefully, ever so slowly, and jam it again hard into the brittle earth. Within seconds I can feel the fingernails tearing slightly away from my fingers. As dirt enters them, I grimace in pain.

I swear that the moon is shining more brightly than it was before, and I curse it. I curse the black power that made the ground as dry and useless as it is, and I curse the easy life that made me as weak and unfit as I am. I curse, too, the power of Katyrina Emerson, because she was able to send me here, and I curse Corwin son of Oberon for forcing me here at all. Most of all, however, I curse myself. I realize now that I am stupid beyond belief.

The only person I don't curse is my father. He alone keeps me going, keeps me digging my fingers once more into a ground now stained with my blood.

I hear a shout. Then something walking towards me. Then silence. Finally what sounds like an all-clear. All this time I have lain totally still, my heart drumming in my temples and my face buried in the stinking ground. Terrified, I breathe in the rank scent of the dead grass. In this moment I understand what hate means.

But then, suddenly, I am across. To my right is the hill

that we saw from the other side. I cannot see past it, and no one can see past it to me. Safe, at least for the time, I pull myself further behind the hill and sit up. Signaling for the next man to begin, I lie on my back to keep myself from vomiting. All I want, this very minute, is to be home in bed.

In what seems a short time, I am joined by one of the others. I don't bother to look at him, because I can feel his unwillingness to communicate. Another joins us after that, and still none of us has spoken. Alone with ourselves, we are afraid to let anyone else in.

At last all of us are across. For several minutes we do not move, each of us as tired and sick as the rest. But at last Tom rises to his knees and speaks. Softly, expertly, he convinces us that we must keep going, and singlehandedly he helps us begin another march. He leads, and we follow. We crawl for a short distance, but then we rise and walk quietly. Finally we are out of danger, and to a man, despite our pain and exhaustion, we break into a dead run.

Another day passes, another day of watching the Black Road to our right, and field after endless field, brown and useless, rolling to our left. Another day of semisickness, minor ailments, near-pain, quasimisery. Nothing, not even disgust, seems real in this place. Everything seems calculated to annoy, to demoralize, rather than to hurt. I've just about had it, and so have the others. Except Tom, that is. As always, except Tom.

I wonder now, though, if we've come the right way. We've found nothing to suggest that Amber is ahead of us, or even if it is, that we'll discover what we're looking for. The army was about to turn west rather than east; there, according to their plans, they would find something worth fighting against. I long now to fight as well. I long to do something dangerous but useful, something that will relieve this feeling of nothingness. And I wonder, too, if Chaos was not a better direction. Maybe, even after coming this far, we should go back the other way.

If Derek decides to turn west and head towards Chaos, turn to Section 13.

If he decides to continue east towards Amber, turn to Section 25.

— 44 —

The wolves leap, two at a time in concert, but we are ready for them. Our swords slice open the bellies of the first two, then my own sword slashes through the forelegs of another. After that it is harder, because the wolves are far more wary, but as each one dies, the next takes less and less interest in the fight. Finally, after only a few exhausting minutes of fighting, it is over. Most of the wolves are dead. The others slink away among the trees.

Tired, hurt, and splattered with blood, we sit on the ground in silence. We are grateful for the victory, grateful for our lives, but all of us realize that this forest is dangerous. Each of my comrades, a number constantly dropping, looks at me in apprehension. They await my decision, still not ready to turn away from me, but not nearly as willing now as they were at the beginning to follow my every move. I must choose carefully, and I must explain my choice.

If Derek decides to turn back to the Black Road and head east towards Amber, turn to Section 55.

If he chooses to go back to the Road and turn West towards Chaos, turn to Section 13.

If he determines that the best course is to continue into the woods, turn to Section 49.

— 45 —

"Now!" I scream again. "Come help us now!"

For a moment I think I've failed, but suddenly Stan McManus shakes his head and comes forward. When the others see him, they, too, begin to approach. Then, their lethargy gone, they draw their weapons and break into a run. They are just in time, for the black creatures have closed to strike.

Use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle. There are six black creatures. Since their Ordnance Value is 7, they have an initial Attack Strength of 42. They fight on Chart C. Derek's men fight on Chart B.

As in all combats, Derek's men have the option of using their guns. If they do, however, they must put a "1" in the RAL box of the stats sheet. If there is already a total in the RAL box, just add 1 to it.

If Derek wins the battle, turn to Section 28.

If he loses, turn to Section 21.

— 46 —

Less courageous now than we have felt at any time, we enter the house. Inside we see a small foyer, complete with a domestic-looking chair and writing table, with a stairway leading up to the left and an entrance to the living room on the right. Straight ahead, I presume, is the kitchen.

Entering first, I look up the stairs and see nothing unusual. At the top of the stairs an open door reveals a

bedroom, but I can see nothing else. To my right a living room holds furniture both old and comfortable. Walking straight, I discover the entrance to what is, in fact, a clean and well-used kitchen. The last of us enters the house and closes the door.

In that moment many things happen at once. The lights dim, and in their place shine many varied colors, each as bright as the last, each pulsing with the beat of my heart. A soft whirr sounds in my brain, increasing in pitch with each passing second, until it stops just past my hearing, in that range proven to lead to madness. In the living room a fire roars into life, but its flames are pale blue rather than red. And up the stairs, from a room we cannot see, comes the pitiful sound of a man groaning in pain.

I fear the sound from above, but the voice is so miserable that I can't simply ignore it. Pushing the others out of my way, I race up the steps towards it. Down a short hall I turn, a hall that ends with an open door to a pulsing green room. Swallowing my fear, I walk towards it.

Inside, a thin, starving man is chained to the wall. His hands are high above him, and he is so weak he can no longer stand. He moans horribly, but when I try to speak to him, he does not, or cannot, hear.

Suddenly I hear footsteps on the stairs. Expecting Tom or one of the others, I stand in the doorway of the room and wait. I am about to ask for help when I see, at the top of the stairs, a man dressed in a white tuxedo carrying a tray filled with food. Stepping backwards into the room, I press myself against the wall.

The man in white enters, greeting the man in chains. Unlocking the chains, the man in white motions for the other to join him at a table in the center of the room. Together they feast, and the smell of the food nearly drives me mad. I am hungry, and I want only to take the food for myself.

When they are done, the man in white locks the chains around the thin man's wrists and ankles once more, and again the moaning starts. The man in white removes the

food and disappears. The chained man, now somewhat less thin, moans ever louder.

Then, suddenly, through the window leaps a tiger, snarling and pacing its way towards the chained man. Screaming, the man tries to move his legs to keep the cat away, but he is weak and the cat is strong, and in the end it is the cat who wins. With the man finally subdued, the cat bites into his side, tears out his liver, and leaps back through the window. A hole in the man's side now gapes and bleeds, and but for my terror, I want to race to him to console him. But now I see the hole begin to close, and as the flesh grows over, I see the beginnings of a new liver emerging in place of the old.

Racing from the room, I leap down the stairs. My comrades are not in the foyer where I left them. I run into the kitchen, turning left and then right, when I see, standing open, a door leading to the basement. Every bone in my body tells me not to venture there, but then I hear Tom's voice yell, "Derek!" Terrified, confused, and wanting to help my friends, I start cautiously down the stairs.

There, at the bottom, I see my friends. Arrayed in battle against seven strong men, they look pitifully weak and completely beyond hope. Drawing my sword, I walk forward to join them, my fear now gone with the promise of battle.

"Who are they?" I ask Tom.

"They called us from above," Tom says. His voice has changed. He seems no longer the Tom I have known all this time.

"Why don't we just get out of here?" I whisper. A pointless suggestion, I realize, but one always worth asking.

Tom shakes his head. "There's no way out," he says. "All the ways are barred." Looking back up the stairs, I understand the truth of his words. The stairs just end, almost in a cloud.

I step forward ahead of the others and survey our foes. One man wears the skins of several animals, and he carries a club. Another is dressed in brilliant armor, with a shield

bearing the design of an entire civilization. A third, half undressed, sports a scar on his back, while a fourth carries a ball of thread in his left hand, a huge sword in his right. Fifth is a huge man wielding an enormous hammer, sixth an insubstantial warrior carrying a trident. The sword of the seventh man has attached to it a large golden rock.

"Who are you?" I shout, but in that moment the battle begins.

Use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle. The seven foes have an Ordnance Value of 9, thus an initial Attack Strength of 63. They fight on Chart B. Derek's men fight on Chart C.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 52.

If he loses, turn to Section 48.

— 47 —

The crossing is difficult, but in the end we all make it. Stan McManus fell to his face more than once, and Branko Verdi accompanied each step with a deathly scream of pain. But with Tom and I shouting encouragement from the sidelines, they all managed to cross the Road. Tom himself seemed to have little trouble, although for a few seconds he stood still in the middle of the Road and sobbed. Once he passed, however, he alone turned to the Road and made a gesture of defiance.

He gave it the finger. I laughed, but I didn't have the guts to do it myself.

Only a couple hundred yards off the wood, we find ourselves entering the start of a forest. What is strange about this forest is that, from a distance, it wasn't there. At no time on our journey along the Black Road did we see trees of any kind on the other side, yet here we are on

the verge of something as unmistakably forest as there could be. When I mention my surprise to Tom, all he can say is that the Black Road moves in mysterious ways. When he is not looking my way, I watch him again, and this time he is looking at the forest with a smile ready to cross his face.

I don't know who he is, but my patience with him is beginning to wear thin. He has proven himself an invaluable companion. I only wish he were more open.

We enter the forest. Quickly it becomes dark. To my nostrils comes the smell of decaying leaves and bark. The trees themselves look old, and many of them are withered and drooping. I wish suddenly that I had not come. Help or no help, this forest is not to my liking. Not at all.

Suddenly, from out of the trees on every side, silent yet intent on our deaths, a host of red wolves steps into our path. Their eyes blaze and their fur shines, and the white of their teeth glows even in this dark. There is no time to turn. We could never outrun them. Only one course is open, and that is to fight.

Use the combat rules to determine the winner. There are eight wolves, and their Ordnance Value is 6. This gives them an initial Attack Strength of 48. They attack on Chart D. When only two wolves remain, they will flee and the battle is over.

Because the wolves are difficult to kill, Derek's men attack as well on Chart D. Remember, though, as in all combats, that Derek's troops can elect to fire their guns. If they do, the Ordnance Value becomes 10 and the fire takes place on Chart B. Also if they use their guns, mark a "1" in the RAL box of the stats sheet.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 44.

If he loses, turn to Section 51.

— 48 —

In almost no time it is over. We are no match for these men, these ancient heroes out of the legends of time. As if we are nothing, they batter us without mercy, some of them crushing our bones while others pierce our skin, our hearts, and our throats.

I see only the enormous hammer flying towards my head. It strikes, and all goes black. May God protect the others.

Turn to Section 29.

— 49 —

"We must, I feel, keep going." I am trying to explain to the others a choice I myself am reluctant to make. "This way promises help, and that's something we can certainly use. In fact, it's come to the point where I don't think we can get through to Amber without some help. Any help, as it turns out."

Their eyes are almost empty. They've seen enough. All of them.

So have I. But I can't let them know that.

Together we rise and resume our march. It is not a long one. In less than an hour we come to a clearing in the woods, and just beyond the clearing, half hidden by tall, healthy trees, stands a small house. It is old, it is immaculately kept, and it is terrifying.

I really can't say what terrifies me. The house looks homey enough, with its flowers and its garden and its white fence and its freshly painted doors and window frames. Clearly it has been recently tended, and this should

Section 50

comfort me. Just as clearly, though, we are the first to have seen this house in many, many years. It has been recently cared for, but that "recently" was long centuries ago.

The house, I swear to God, is out of time.

And that's why I'm scared.

I take a deep breath to close off the panic. Help, I was promised here. Should I, *can* I, believe that promise? Or should I make some excuses based on the age, the atmosphere, the inappropriateness, hell, based on *anything*, and lead us to Amber? I am as certain of the Black Road as I am of anything in this strange and frightening place we have come to. The Road, at least, we have seen before. For that matter, it leads as well to Chaos. We're back to that again, too. The choices whirl and spin in my mind.

If Derek decides to enter the house, turn to Section 46.

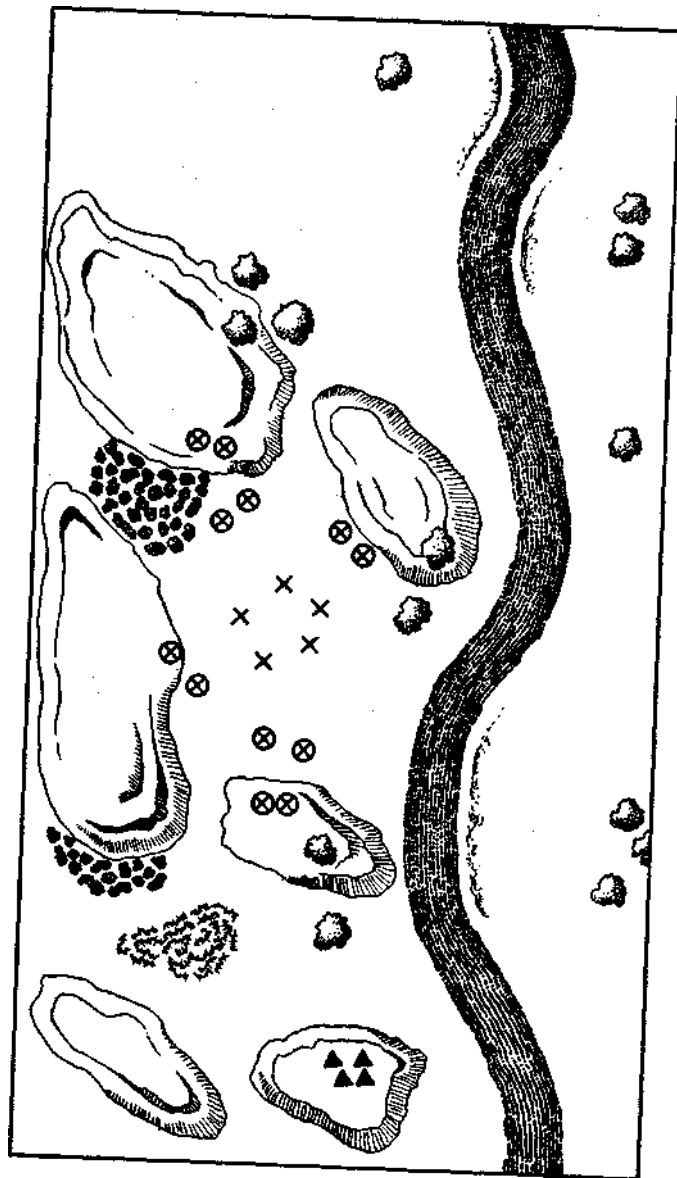
If he decides to turn back to the Road and head east to Amber, turn to Section 55.

If he chooses to go back to the Black Road and turn west for Chaos, turn to Section 13.

— 50 —

It doesn't take long to find out whether or not we'll make it. The first man to try is Stan McManus, and he takes only two steps before he collapses in a sobbing heap upon the Road. Not all of Tom's encouragement can force him to continue, and my comrades pull him from the Road and let him lie. In a conference among themselves, they decide to continue without him.

Branko Verdi fares little better. He takes four steps, but each one brings forth a scream so terrible that I pray he will turn back. Finally he does, whimpering and shaking



visibly. When he reaches the edge of the Road, he collapses into Tom's waiting arms.

"We can't cross," Tom shouts. "We just can't do it." Tom himself hasn't tried. I get the impression he doesn't want to. But, then, why should he? His friends couldn't follow him even if he did.

Realizing that proceeding by myself will accomplish nothing, I prepare to recross the Road. Strangely, nothing happens. Not a single bolt, not a single flash. Nothing. Suddenly I seem to have become unimportant. I feel oddly bitter about that.

Now we have only two choices. West towards Chaos or east towards Amber. Whatever help we might have gained by heading for the mysterious house in the woods is lost to us. Too bad. We could have used it.

If Derek decides to turn west, turn to Section 13.

If he decides to proceed east, turn to Section 55.

— 51 —

The wolves leap, two at a time, and we are ready for them. Our swords slice as hard as they can, and one of the wolves drops. But the other has ripped open the throat of one of my comrades. I can't tell whom, because in that moment I see the largest of the wolves about to spring towards me.

I raise my sword, and the wolf tenses to leap. Its eyes burn with fury and the thrill of the fight. Its hair rises from its body. Its teeth grimace at me, looking almost like a demented laugh.

And then it springs. My sword tears open its stomach, but that is not enough. I feel its teeth sink into my throat, and I feel my blood roaring from my neck. In almost no

time at all I collapse, with the sound of swords and teeth ringing through my mind.

The dark is now complete.

Turn to Section 29.

— 52 —

I don't know how, but for some reason we are outfighting them. Our swords ring wildly across theirs, and where they miss us completely, we find chinks in their armor and openings behind their shields. Tom kills one, then another, and more drop at the hands of my comrades.

Facing me, now, is the huge man with the hammer. His muscles fairly rip through his clothes, and his shield, although large and heavy, hangs limply on his left arm. Crouching, he swings through with his hammer and crushes the floor at my feet. I fall with the shock. He leaps and is upon me.

How I raise my sword I'll never know. But I do. And the big, great man, lumbering towards me, pierces himself through to the chest and falls atop me. I push him off, and, covered in blood, I rise and move in to help the others.

It is over. We have won.

At the far side of this hellhole we see a door. Through it we now walk, because there is no other direction for us to go. Stepping onto grass as soft as snow, we look before us and see gleaming silver ships sail like swans on a lake of shimmering blue. One stands still, as if waiting for us, and we now walk to it. An old man stands at the top of the gangplank, holding his hands out towards us.

Stepping before him, I take his hand, but he points towards my sword. Unsheathing it, I give it to him. He nods and points me inside. Following, the others enter and stand with me as the ship sets sail onto the lake.

I do not know where we are headed. Wherever it is,

though, we have the company of a thoroughly engrossing companion. Old he is, and white of hair, and soft of speech, but he is wise beyond my understanding and healthy beyond my belief. I ask him his name, and he replies, "Caron."

Only Tom has not come with us. He is lost to me now. I can't honestly say I'll miss him.

My cares are past. I wish my father well. For a long time I wanted to avenge his death, but now I want only to accept my own. My journey is too delicious for anything else to matter.

Turn to Section 29.

— 53 —

"Flora?" I begin to say, grasping at the only woman's name I can remember. "Or . . .?" But even as my lips purse to form the word, she is shaking her head. Her blue eyes are sad, but already distant.

"It is humbling to be forgotten. But I do not blame you in any way. Your Shadow—" She stops herself, and then gestures. I wonder what she was about to say.

Turn to Section 38.

— 54 —

With less than twenty yards to travel, and that downhill, I decide to risk the frontal assault. Perhaps the drop and the surprise will throw them off kilter; it certainly can't do us any harm. It worked on Custer, didn't it?

I give the signal, and then we are pelting down the slope, whooping and yelling like the Indians in the best

spaghetti westerns, our swords drawn and gleaming in the moonlight.

Turn to Section 35. For this battle, Derek will fight on Chan C, and the robed figures will fight on Chart D. Note that this information supersedes the information in Section 35.

— 55 —

Despite all the options available to us, all the directions we might go and all the things we might do, eastwards still seems the only sensible direction. I want to get to Amber, and with all my vacillating, I've never doubted that Amber lies this way.

The Black Road still runs beside us, but the landscape is beginning to change. In place of the burnt fields we now see feeble shrubs, trees struggling for life, grass growing a faint green among the now frequent hills. Still the land is far from paradisaal, but somehow life now seems possible.

Over the hills we march, each of us in turn gaining considerable vigor from the slowly emerging life around us. The air has begun to turn slightly cooler, fresher, and that, too, invigorates us. What is happening, I soon realize, is that we are stepping from a near-desert into a region of habitability. The change, however good for the life-forms around us, is every bit as good for us.

Raise the Morale value for Derek's troops by 1.

And then, the shouts of battle. Good. We are ready. Spirited and willing. We want to do something more than just march.

To the crest of this hill we climb. Looking over the top, we see, on a hill roughly forty yards away, two bowmen with their backs to us. They are dressed in silver helms

with a black cloak trimmed in brilliant red. Beyond their hill are the shouts that drew us here.

To our left is a hill smaller than the one we are standing on. Below us, between Hills 2 and 3, is a small thicket, enough to hide in if no one is trying to find us, but nothing more than that. Past the thicket is another hill, quite high, on the near slope of which stands a series of bushes. To our right, as always, winds the Black Road. Beyond that we can see nothing.

I pull Tom aside. "Someone's under attack," I say, hastily adding, "That's pretty obvious. But we can't tell who, or whether these guys in front of us are people we should attack or not. I don't like the looks of those cloaks, but at this point I'm not going to judge on color alone."

"That's probably quite wise," Tom whispers in reply. "I don't know what they're doing there, either, but it looks as if we've either got to get rid of them to find out, or scout around for more information."

I nod. "That's what I was thinking. I'm going to go back a bit, then head for the hill to our left. I'll use the thicket to cover me, and get to that higher hill. Maybe I can see what's going on from there." As I begin to turn down the hill, Tom grabs my arm.

"I don't think you should go," he whispers. "You're the leader, Derek. We're supposed to do that kind of thing."

"I know. But I want to do something. This won't take long, and it won't be dangerous. I've become quite good at keeping out of sight. Besides, you guys can use some rest. It's been a long march."

Tom shakes his head. "Derek, look, why not let me go? I'm not as tired as some of them, and if I get knocked off, nobody's going to care. I'll get your information and come back as soon as I have it." Insistent as he is, Tom seems very convincing.

In the end, though, it's that insistence that makes me deny his request. Something about Tom has been bothering me ever since we turned east. He's different from the

others. Somehow. And over the past few marches I've found myself beginning not to trust him as completely as I once did. As we approach Amber, he seems to be getting restless. Maybe he knows something I don't know. Or maybe he's not really who he says he is. I don't know. All I know is that I don't like it.

My dash to Hill 4 is uneventful. I backtrack about fifty yards, then come upon Hill 3 from the southwest. Using the thicket for cover, I leap and then crawl my way to the larger hill, resting for a moment in the bushes on the slope. Once on the hill, I swing around to the north side to avoid being seen, then dragging myself on my stomach, I reach and look over the top.

Directly in front of me, not ten feet away, stands a bowman. Dressed exactly like the others, he looks down into the valley, his bow ready, clearly awaiting an order to shoot. What distinguishes this one from the others is not his dress, but something we were not close enough to the others to notice. This one stinks. His smell is vile.

Dropping back down the hill, I crawl to my left. There I see a line of bushes growing over the crest of the hill, and I am grateful. If I can make it into them, I should be able to see what's going on.

Crawling and rolling, I enter the bushes. Moving among them to the top of the hill, I lie on my belly and peer over. Below me, in a deep valley in the center of four large hills, five men stand in a circle, their backs to one another, swords raised and shields ready. Charging towards them are, as far as I can tell, six figures with black cloaks trimmed in red, and suddenly from my own hill a seventh enters the fray. On the hill to my left stand two bowmen, while on the hill to my right I can barely see the two bowmen whose backs we saw originally. The hill straight ahead of me, as near as I can see, is empty.

And then something strikes me about the men in the black, red-trimmed cloaks. They look human, that is certain, but their legs, now flying out from under their cloaks

Section 56

as they run, are the legs of lizards. From the valley comes a vile smell.

"We have several choices," I say to the others when I return. "We can try to take out the two bowmen in front of us, we can skirt around to Hill 4 and knock off the single bowman, or we can try for Hill 5, the empty hill, and charge down into the attackers' backs. Whichever we choose, I'm willing to bet on one thing: the people being attacked are the ones we should help."

"Or we could just leave them be," insists Tom, his voice suddenly stern. "I mean, we're trying to get to Amber, not to get killed."

He's right. We could leave them be. But while watching the men in the valley, and imagining myself in their place, I came to realize that getting to Amber isn't going to mean much if I have to live with the memory of not helping them. I have seen lizard legs on their attackers. I can only guess what will happen if they also have lizard's tails.

"No," I command. "We stay, and we attack." With that, I walk away.

If Derek decides to attack the two bowmen immediately in front (Hill 2), turn to Section 62.

If he chooses to attack the bowman on Hill 4, turn to Section 64.

If he elects to try to get to Hill 5, turn to Section 60.

— 56 —

I like the odds on the flanking assault better. Not only can we, I hope, achieve surprise, but our enemy will face two battles at once. Carefully, I divide up the men, sending half north along the hill with Tom. They were his men before they were mine, and I trust his judgment of them most.

Section 57

Time seems to crawl along the slopes with Tom and his men, and I worry that I have made the wrong choice. What if the robed figures see our maneuvering? But their conversation continues, and my men are patient. Their confidence in me reinforces flagging spirits.

And then I see Tom's "in position" gesture, and it is time for action, not thought.

Turn to Section 35. For this battle, Derek will fight on Chart B and the robed figures will fight on Chart D. Note that this information supersedes the information in Section 35.

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For this section, refer to Map #1. This map details the relative positions of Derek's troops and the robed creatures. Studying this map will help you decide which choice to make.

The robed figures are huddled near the Black Road. We lie, side by side, at the crest of the small hill. Between us and them is less than twenty yards.

We can launch the attack in one of two ways. The first way is a frontal assault, with all of us standing up suddenly and racing down the hill towards them. This has several advantages, not the least of which is that it requires little planning on our part. We should take them by surprise, and that, too, will help. The bad part, as always with frontal assaults, is that the enemy has time to turn and stand together.

More sophisticated, but harder to achieve, is a flanking assault. Here, half of us would move north along the hill to a spot roughly twenty yards from where we are. From there, they will rush down the hill, past where the figures sit, and then turn towards the road. As soon as they close

within twenty yards or so, the rest of us will rush off the hill into the enemy's flank, maybe even their rear.

Either way has its advantages, and both have their problems. Right now, the biggest problem is getting started.

If Derek chooses the frontal assault, turn to Section 54.

If he chooses the flanking attack, turn to Section 56.

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The heat sears through us as arrows begin to fly. They burn with flame, these arrows, and the flame does not die when the arrows strike the ground. Even when they do not strike us directly, they lie on the ground and wait for one of us, unsuspecting, to step on them while backing away from an attack. Whatever concentration we might have had is lost, as we must focus not only on our foes but also on the tongues of flame they have already fired.

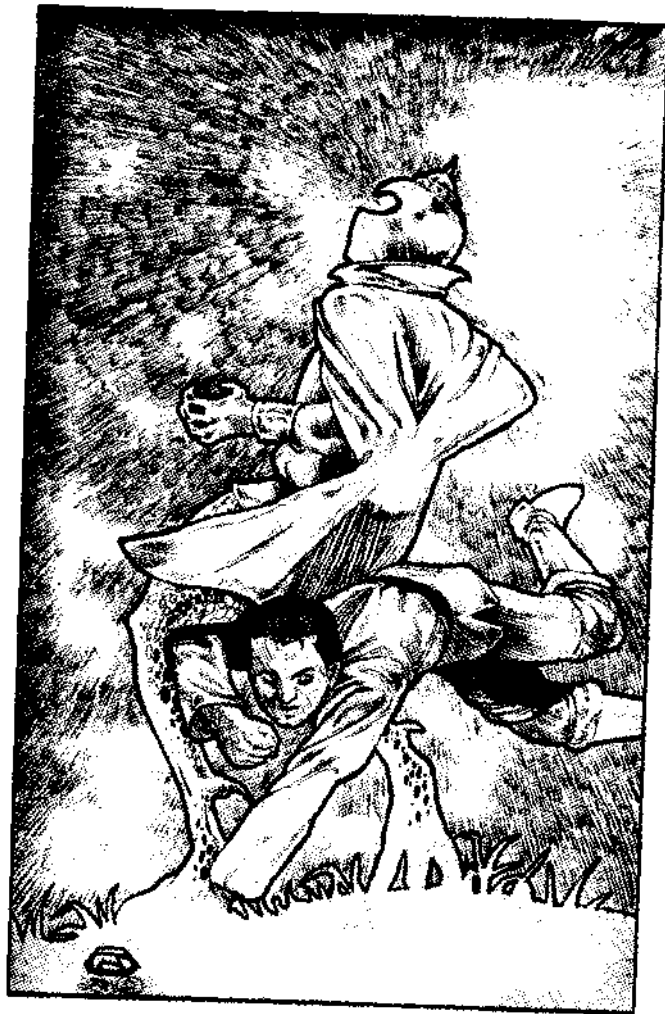
I swing hard and strike one of them. It falls to the ground, and I pull out my sword. It is hot, and my arm is hot as well. It barely responds to my command that it strike again.

Finally it obeys, but I am too late. A flaming arrow sears through my chest, and a gleaming red sword descends towards my head. I feel my lungs burning, I feel the fire spread throughout my body, I feel my brain begin to die in the heat and the flow of my blood.

Turn to Section 29.

— 59 —

Perfect. I fly into the backs of his knees white Stan grabs his throat. As he topples to the ground, Tom plunges his knife into every soft spot he can find. The creature is so damned ugly that we have no trouble killing him.



Maybe that's a terrible thing to say, but in this case it's true. He stinks so badly that we almost vomit, and his bow breaks as he falls, but we defeat him without being seen.

The five men in the valley are now in the midst of their battle. None of them are dead yet, but bowmen from the other hills are preparing to fire. With surprise on our side, we begin our charge to join the fight.

Use the combat rules to determine who wins this battle. There are eleven lizard men, and their Ordnance is 6. They fight on Chart D, partly because they are surprised. Their initial Attack Strength, therefore, is 66.

Because he is joining other fighters, Derek's Manpower Value is now increased by 5. The Ordnance Value of the entire group is 6. They fight on Chart B, because the five original fighters are highly trained.

If Derek's men win, turn to Section 69.

If they lose, turn to Section 65.

— 60 —

From the unoccupied hill, we decide, we can make whatever plans we want. Getting there won't be easy, not without being spotted at least, but it seems a fair bit easier than killing off a couple of bowmen without anyone seeing us. We choose the hill because it seems the easiest and most sensible route.

To get there, though, we must crawl, and we must be quiet. It will require all our wits not to be found out. I hope we can do it.

Roll two six-sided dice and compare the result to Derek's Stealth Value.

If the roll succeeds, turn to Section 61.

If not, turn to Section 68.

— 61 —

The hardest part is going to be getting past the nearest two bowmen. One at a time we crawl, with me in the lead, directly through their path of fire. The only chance we have is if they keep their eyes on the battle and don't look to the side. If they do that, with any concentration at all, we're lost.

So far, so good. I've made it into the valley near the Black Road, far enough away from the bowmen's eyes that I should have no trouble the rest of the way. I watch the others over my shoulder as I crawl. They seem in no danger. Watching the battle, waiting for their chance to fire, is the bowmen's only concern. Ducking behind the unoccupied hill, I wait for my comrades to join me. When they do, I look down from the hill.

The five men in the valley are now in the midst of their battle. None of them are dead yet, but bowmen from the other hills are preparing to fire. With surprise on our side, we begin our charge to join the fight.

Use the combat rules to determine who wins this battle. There are eleven lizard men, and their Ordnance is 6. They fight on Chart D, partly because they are surprised. Their initial Attack Strength, therefore, is 66.

Because he is joining other fighters, Derek's Manpower Value is now increased by 5. The Ordnance Value of the entire group is 6. They fight on Chart B, because the five original fighters are highly trained.

If Derek's men win, turn to Section 69.

If they lose, turn to Section 65.

— 62 —

There is little discussion. The unoccupied hill is too far, while trying for the one man on Hill 4 seems pointlessly complex.

We'll have to fight them hand-to-hand, though, if we have any hope of remaining unseen. Even then, if they cry out, or if someone is watching them, we'll be spotted for sure.

We divide our forces so that the same number will attack each man. The idea is to coordinate the melee so that we grab them and trip them up at the same time. Then, when they hit the ground, we can stab them through the throat. What happens if their scales act like armor? I don't know. We'll worry about it then.

All right. Here we go. I hope this works.

Use the combat rules to determine the victor. The lizard men fight on Chart E because they are surprised. They have a Melee Value of 5, for an initial Attack Strength of 10. Derek's men fight on Chart C.

If Derek's men win, turn to Section 67.

If they lose, turn to Section 72.

— 63 —

Even though part of me wants to continue eastwards, and another part thinks going west may provide a better answer, I am unable to resist the possibility of help. We are fewer than before, and we have little to sustain us besides sheer determination. Any help that might come along will be more than casually welcome.

It's even tempting enough to chance crossing the Black Road.

"Are you ordering us to do this, Derek?" asks Tom, coming out of nowhere to stand by my side.

"Yes," I insist after a few seconds thought.

Shaking his head, Tom turns away. "I think you're making a mistake," he says, "but since you're the man with the money, I'm not going to say anything else. If we have to do this, let's get it over with."

Talking about money, in a place where it seems to have no use, strikes me as a little odd. Somehow Tom's objection seems less than sincere. Maybe I'm getting a little jumpy. Certainly the Black Road has that effect.

Together we walk to the Road. In the light of dawn it lies dormant, its moonlight shimmering temporarily at rest. It looks safe, entirely safe, and yet even in its safety it exudes an aura of audacity, almost as if it is daring us to step onto it. Well, Road, I say to myself, realizing how stupid I am sounding, I can be audacious as well. Hell, I got us this far, didn't I?

And onto the Black Road I take my first step.

Instantly a tremor runs through me. Suddenly frightened, I whip my head from side to side looking for the source of my fear, but nothing surrounds me but the growing dawn and my weary companions. Stifling my fear for the time being, I summon the courage for another step. Like a bolt from the sky, a brilliant flash enters my brain and seers my vision. For what seems a second, but is probably several minutes, I stand rooted in place, unable to see and unwilling to think, while all around me I hear the shouting voices of people too far away for me to care.

Fight it, damn it! I tell myself. *Fight the goddamn thing!* Brave words, man, brave but hardly intelligent. I will myself to take another step, and another bolt hurls me to my knees. Then I lift my left knee and place it forward, where the touch of the Road burns through my clothes and blisters my flesh. Screaming, I fall to my face.

But even this whirling stops, and I manage to struggle to my feet. Hanging my head, because I haven't the strength to lift it, I shake my fist at the Black Road and in my mind shout, as loud as I can, *Forget it. I'm not even hurt. Not one little bit.* It's a lie, of course, something I always wanted to say to the school bully, but all of a sudden I realize that what I've said is in fact true. My knee is not burned, and my vision is not blurred. Nor is my head too heavy to raise. Lifting it now, I open my eyes and look straight ahead. To my surprise, I have only one step left. A leap, a final skip, and I am off the Road. I have crossed it, and I have lived.

Now it is the turn of the others. I shout encouragement to them, telling them to ignore what seems to be happening. Beyond that, of course, I have no control over them.

To get across the Black Road, Derek's troops must pass a Morale check. Roll two six-sided dice and compare the result to the Morale Value of Derek's men. If the Morale roll succeeds, turn to Section 47.

If the Morale roll fails, turn to Section 50.

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There is little discussion. The unoccupied hill is too far, while trying for the one man on Hill 4 seems considerably clearer than trying to take out two men on the hill directly before us.

We'll have to fight him hand-to-hand, though, if we have any hope of remaining unseen. Even then, if he cries out or if someone is watching him, we'll be spotted for sure.

The idea is to coordinate the melee so that we grab the Bowman and trip him up at the same time. Then, when he hits the ground, we can stab him through the throat. What

happens if his scales act like armor? I don't know. We'll worry about it then.

We crawl to Hill 4 the same way Tom did. It is not difficult, because everyone else is too concerned with the main battle. Stopping just behind our man, we catch our breath before heading over the top.

All right. Here we go. I hope this works.

Use the combat rules to determine the victor. The lizard man fights on Chart E because he is surprised. He has a Melee Value of 5, for an initial Attack Strength of 5. Derek's men fight on Chart C.

If Derek's men win, turn to Section 59.

If they lose, turn to Section 65.

— 65 —

It ends quickly. We charge hard, and we fight harder, but in the end we are no match for them. Their skin repulses most of our best thrusts, and wounds mean less to them than they do to us. If they were like us, we might have a chance. But they aren't, and we don't.

I fall near the end, a victim to a spear. It is through me before I know it, and at first I do not believe it. But then the blackness comes; my eyes go dark and my brain closes forever. I see as I fall that Tom battles on, but I know that he will not last long.

We have come far, but we have much farther to go. How pitiable that we will not do what we have come to do.

Turn to Section 29.

— 66 —

The only possible entry to this section is from Section 25. If you have entered from any other section, turn back to that section and choose again.

"Deirdre," I say at last. Her smile broadens, enchanting me and filling me with hope.

"Yes, Derek. I am Deirdre."

"But I thought you were dead. I thought Brand pulled you with him off that cliff."

"Dead? Who says I am not?" Her eyes pierce through mine, but they are neither mocking nor angry. "Remember, Derek, not everything is logical." A short, soft laugh escapes her lips.

And then she raises her arms into the sky, and pale blue light dancing from her fingers. In a second she lowers them again, and for a moment, she hangs her head.

"I have little to give you, nephew," she almost whispers. "Little except the advice I have already offered. I am peaceful, and I have given you and your comrades a small gift of peace. You may never realize it, but in battle you will be helped.

Deirdre's gift is permanent. During each battle, the opponent will attack on a chart one level inferior to that stated in the section. For instance, if the section states that the opponents fight on Chart E, they will fight on Chart C instead.

Turn to Section 38.

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Perfect. I fly into the backs of one lizard man's knees while Stan grabs his throat. As he topples to the ground, Stan plunges his knife into every soft spot he can find. The creature is so damned ugly that we have no trouble killing him. Maybe that's a terrible thing to say, but in this case it's true.

The other lizard man is taken care of, although not quite as neatly. Still, in less than a minute both of them lie dead, and Tom and I have donned their cloaks and helms. They stink so badly that we almost vomit, but we manage to take their bows and rise in their place.

With the bows, Derek's Ordnance Value increases to 6. If and when all the men in Derek's group have bows, the Ordnance will become 7. Keep track of the number of arrows. After 20 rounds of fighting with the bows, no arrows will be left. There is, however, a possibility that Derek will find arrows along the way.

The five men in the valley are now in the midst of their battle. None of them are dead yet, but bowmen from the other hills are preparing to fire. With surprise on our side, we begin our charge to join the fight.

Use the combat rules to determine who wins this battle. There are ten lizard men, and their Ordnance is 6. They fight on Chart D, partly because they are surprised. Their initial Attack Strength, therefore, is 60.

Because he is joining other fighters, Derek's Manpower Value is now increased by 5. The Ordnance Value of the

entire group is 6. They fight on Chart B, because the five original fighters are highly trained.

If Derek's men win, turn to Section 69.

If they lose, turn to Section 65.

— 68 —

The hardest part is going to be getting past the nearest two bowmen. One at a time we crawl, with me in the lead, directly through their path of fire. The only chance we have is if they keep their eyes on the battle and don't look to the side. If they do that, with any concentration at all, we're lost.

So far, so good. I've made it into the valley near the Black Road, far enough away from the bowmen's eyes that I should have no trouble the rest of the way. I watch the others over my shoulder as I crawl. They seem in no danger. Watching the battle, waiting for their chance to fire, is the bowmen's only concern. Ducking behind the unoccupied hill, I wait for my comrades to join me.

Suddenly I hear a moan. Looking out from behind my cover, I see Branko Verdi writhing on the ground, an arrow lodged in his throat as he gurgles in his own blood. Dropping onto my stomach, I crawl towards him and reach out my hand.

Before I reach it, I feel an arrow pierce my lung, then another rip through my neck. Grasping at Branko's hand, I clutch a handful of grass and pull it from the ground. Then my head droops and my vision goes black.

Turn to Section 29.

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Into the valley we charge, overtaking two attacking lizard men as we run. With little difficulty we take them out, and an arrow from Tom's bow kills another who charges towards us. Sensing victory, we fight hard and with no sign of exhaustion.

What amazes us, though, is the skill of the five men we have come to help. Brilliant with their swords, they parry expertly and thrust only to kill. Rarely do they miss, and when they do, they recover in a heartbeat. Awestruck, I almost forget about the rest of the lizard men, and an arrow flies inches over my head.

Finally, though, it is over, and we have won.

"I thank you," says one of our new allies. He walks towards me as he sheaths his sword. "The battle would have been much more difficult without you. Perhaps we would have lost."

"I doubt it," I smile. "I've never seen sword skills like that before. How did you get so good?"

"Practice," he returns, neither accepting the compliment nor denying its truth. "A great deal of practice." He pauses, then asks, "But who are you, my friend? And where are you going?"

I look at the ground, then back into his eyes. Like the others, he is a strong man, and his red hair clashes brilliantly with his green eyes. I suddenly realize that I am completely out of his league.

"You won't have heard of me," I say, without even a hint of modesty. "As for where I'm going, well..." For a second I pause. "I'm trying to get to Amber."

"You, too? The place is hard to find, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I agree, hardly noticing his lack of surprise. "I think it's got something to do with the Road. It draws

Section 69

us off the track. Or at least it seems to." When he says nothing, I add, "Maybe I'm wrong."

"Probably you are right," he says at last. "Perhaps that is where we've gone wrong." He looks at the others, but they say nothing. "Since we are also searching for Amber, why not join forces? There may be more attacks, and we could help one another."

"That sounds fine by me," I exclaim. "But why are you looking for it?"

"We are messengers," he replies, "from a place across the Black Road. We are trying to reach King Random, to tell him of our great need of soldiers to fight against Chaos. We had just crossed the Road when we were attacked."

I nod, thinking the story sounds as plausible as it's going to get. "All right, then, let's find Random together. One thing though," I add with a smile, "if we find him, I get first audience. Okay?"

The man smiles. "Good. But take as little time as you can. Our land is in danger."

"So is my mind, friend. So is my mind."

For two days we march, each group keeping to itself. Only one of them, it turns out, is able to talk our language, and the rest are quiet even among themselves. Among us remains a profound mistrust of each other, a feeling that neither group seems willing to change. We will fight together, and we are grateful for the assistance, but we have nothing to share with one another.

Somewhere during the night of the second day, I am on guard as we rest beneath the trees of the beginnings of a forest. It has been so long since I've seen real trees that I spend the entire watch sitting against the trunk of the largest tree I can find and drinking in the smell of the bark and the leaves, even of the undergrowth. Moonlight dances through the branches and the air is cool and calm.

Suddenly, less than twenty yards away, in a small clearing among a small clump of thin-trunked trees, a dark figure makes itself known. It stands as if calling to me,

even though it says no word, and I realize soon that I do not wish to ignore it. Rising from my place, I walk cautiously towards it, wondering as I do so if I am doing the right thing.

"Who are you?" I ask. "What do you want?"

"I want you," comes an unearthly reply. The voice is deep, and it almost echoes as it speaks. It seems to come not from the figure's mouth, but rather from the ground beneath it. "You are the son of Eric, prince of Amber. Am I not correct?"

"You're correct," I say. How he knows this, I have no idea, but there's no point denying it.

"You have come to Amber to discover the truth about his death. Is that not also correct?"

"Two for two," I mumble, beginning to think I've come across a lawyer. Such pointed questions, and both of them exactly right. Scary, that.

"I have little time," he says. "I wish only to help you." Somehow I don't believe that. Nothing in this entire place has wanted to help me, and I can't see why anything would now. But I'll listen, if only because I have no choice. He has me under some kind of spell, or something like that.

He drops his gray cloak to the forest floor. Under it he wears armor of fine, strong mail, silver throughout but in places displaying gold. Festive armor rather than fighting armor, I realize, but impressive—and beautiful—nevertheless. On his head he wears nothing, but at his side gleams a thick broadsword, its handle ornate, with jewels set in the design of a unicorn.

"Eric died," he begins, "because he did not act as a prince of Amber should. He wanted to rule, and no prince who wants that can do so. And he hated Corwin, who should have ruled. That, too, was a strike against him.

"And yet he was not an evil man, nor was he a malevolent ruler. He was misguided, and misled by his siblings, but he could have done well had he not let others think for

him. Corwin did not kill him, Derek, nor did he want him to die. His narrative renders that extremely clear."

"Crap!" I shout. "There's almost nothing in the book about my father. His death is practically casual."

"Yes, but what do you expect? By the time Corwin wrote the book, the death had long passed. Corwin had little emotion left for it. And besides, if you examine the narrative closely, you'll find that Corwin injects little emotion even into things vital to his story. Eric's death was not vital. Politically, in fact, it was not a good thing at all."

I'm puzzled. "But the death allowed Corwin as much power as he effectively wanted. It worked completely to his benefit. From there, he could turn his attention to Chaos."

"So it seems," the figure responds. "But had Eric lived, Corwin would have been able to stay out of the light. He would have been able to operate secretly against Chaos, able to make it appear as if he were leaving Amber because he hated his brother. Eric's death thrust Corwin on to the throne, and from there almost all his actions were public knowledge. He could hide no longer."

He's got me on that one. I hadn't thought of that at all. "I go now, Derek. I want only to say that Corwin does not deserve your hatred. He was a worthy prince, and it was a sad thing, a truly unfortunate day, when he did not accept the throne of Amber. Random is a good king. Corwin would have been great. I have never understood the unicorn's choice."

"Wait," I whisper as he begins to turn away. "Who are you?"

"Haven't you guessed by now?" he asks. "Name me, Derek. Name me now, and I will be grateful. I do not like being forgotten."

To figure out who this man is, you will need to have read the Amber books. Once you decide, refer to the table below. Beside each letter of the alphabet is a number. Spell the man's name, and beside each letter place the

corresponding number. Then add up all the numbers to come up with a total. Add 4 to this total. This final figure is the number of the section to which you should now turn.

If you are correct, continue reading from that section. The section itself will tell you if you are right.

If you are incorrect, first recheck your addition. If still incorrect, turn to Section 76.

CONVERSION TABLE

| | | | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| A=1 | B=2 | C=3 | D=4 | E=5 | F=6 | G=7 | H=8 |
| I=9 | J=10 | K=11 | L=12 | M=13 | N=14 | O=15 | P=16 |
| Q=17 | R=18 | S=19 | T=20 | U=27 | V=22 | W=23 | X=24 |
| Y=25 | Z=26 | | | | | | |

— 70 —

Somehow, against every conceivable hope, we are winning this battle. Never recovering from the surprise of our attack, the cavalymen fall quickly and with less fight than we could have dreamed. With them gone, we are free to move forward and, irony of ironies, begin rolling up *their* flank. They scream loud, these soldiers of Chaos, but their screams are songs to our ears.

When we are done, I step back for a moment and survey the rest of our army. For the first time I see it as it really is, an unlikely and awesome collection of beings of all types, things of great beauty and things of great ugliness. Horned man-shaped things in light armor, slowly, rhythmically singing as they slaughter. Bestial troops, ghostly drummers, beings of pure light, black horsemen on a managerie of mounts, all sorts of different species fighting in all sorts of different ways. I think back to the great battle that Corwin describes near the end of his Chronicles,

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and I realize that in this, at least, he is true. Amber's allies are many, both in number and in kind.

But my task is not complete. I must walk the Pattern.

If Derek decides to walk the Pattern by himself, turn to Section 75.

If he asks Julian to walk the Pattern with him, turn to Section 84.

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"No," he says sadly. "Unfortunately, you are wrong." He looks at me, his eyes ready to fill with tears. Before they do, though, he begins to speak again.

"Still, I can help you—*no, wait, you must not*—it is Fine, yes, it is correct—*it is wrong, wrong, it will be wrong*—no," and his voice rises, "it is right. And it shall be done." By now he is shouting, although only he is talking. I do not understand.

"You must forgive me, Derek," he says, his voice bathed in humility. "I have begun to question everything I do. Such is my underconfidence in this state.

"I can help you. I can tell you what you must do. Listen, now, Derek. Listen closely.

"Before you an army fights to defend a portion of the Black Road. In that spot of the Road, carved deeply into it, lies a new version of the Great Pattern of Amber. You must walk the Pattern, Derek. You must walk it alone.

"Should anyone attempt to help you—anyone at all—you must refuse them. Julian will try, but his battles will occupy him long enough for you to begin. Caine will try as well. Perhaps even Brand will try. But, if you are to succeed, you must walk the Pattern alone.

"If you complete the Pattern, you will be able to go anywhere you please. To complete your quest, however,

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you must go to only one place. You must wish yourself on to the throne of Amber. Only there will you attract the power you need to meet, to question—to threaten if need be—the people you seek. Go anywhere else, and you are lost. Join this battle, and you will be slain. Do only as I have told you.

"Start now, Derek. For the sake of all of us, start now."

And with that, he walks from the hill and fades from our sight. He is gone, and I feel strangely empty.

If Derek decides to walk the Pattern, turn to Section 75.

If he decides to join the battle, turn to Section 79.

— 72 —

From the start the job is bungled. Some whisper, some scrape of stone, must have alerted him. Or maybe it is just this place that does not want us here and turns our luck. At any rate, the lizard man turns just as I crouch to spring. A startled yell breaks from his throat, warning the second, and they both attack.

We are no match for maddened lizards. Their grotesqueness gives even the most hardened of my men pause, and that hesitancy is our undoing. Knife and claw cut into my face, and I am sickened.

Frantically I wave my remaining men to retreat. But to my horror, the other lizard archers are firing on us. Their aim is good—too good, I realize, as the sharp shaft of an arrow drills into my chest. Blood burbles brightly from the wound. A lung hit. At least I won't breathe lizard stink much longer. I still stand, I think, but I no longer know. Or care.

Turn to Section 29.

— 73 —

The only possible entry to this section is from Section 69. If you have entered from any other section, turn back to that section and choose again.

"To judge from the way you talk about Amber and the succession," I say, slowly and hesitantly, "and to judge from how close you seem to Corwin, I can only conclude that you are Oberon. The father of the nine princes. Former king of Amber."

"Yes, Derek, I am Oberon." He nods slowly, his face aging further even as he speaks. "It is too late now, but I wish I could turn back and do many things over. Things I did so very wrong. But I can't. My time is over, Random's has begun." He stops. Then slowly he raises his head and looks into my eyes. "Random, King of Amber. I never thought I'd say that, Derek. Never. Always," and here he looks to the sky, "always I thought it would be Corwin."

After a long silence, I mutter, "I know, Your Majesty. I got that much from Corwin's own Chronicles. But that doesn't help me much. You've got to understand. If you wanted Corwin, then of course you would agree with Corwin's account. It explains much about you, mostly in a favorable light. And it does nothing to deny your wish that Corwin be your successor. Why, given your biases as well as Corwin's, should I believe it any more strongly, simply because I've been granted an opportunity to talk to you?"

Oberon looks at me, and his eyes furrow. But then he allows a slow smile to cross his face. Again he speaks.

"You are shrewd, Derek. Shrewder than you probably realize. What you have done is something that literary critics can only dream of doing: to penetrate into the heart of a first-person narrative and try to solve what is really

going on. You are attempting to understand, to sort out, to re-create, the mind that first wrote that narrative. I admire your ambition, even if I despise your interference.

"But about many things you are wrong. You assume that Corwin's narration must be unreliable, simply because he told it from his point of view. That is the normal critical opinion about almost any first-person account. But remember, Derek, that you are dealing with a prince of Amber, a prince of Amber who was once destined to be its king. A prince of Amber who not only walked the Great Pattern, but singlehandedly re-created it. Corwin of Amber is not just another person. He is special, magnificently special. He is, in many ways, your own creator, because from his redrawn Pattern comes the very possibility of your own Shadow Earth.

"What if I told you, then, that Corwin was not only a fully reliable narrator, but one wholly incapable of being unreliable? How could a prince of Amber, whose actions have virtually created the concept of truth and who has devoted all those words to re-creating what went on in his mind for all those years, how could such a man lie? In merely exploring his soul, as he does throughout his Chronicles, he is placing himself so far above the normal flow of things that any untruths that might filter down to lesser minds are so subtle as to be, in fact, truths. You look at his narration as that of a man. Look at it from now on as the Chronicles of a deity.

"In many ways, Derek, that is what Corwin is.

"And now I must go. But I can give you a gift, one that might help you reach Amber. For I want you to discover the truth for yourself, even if you may never believe it. And even though, as I hope you do not discover, knowing the truth may mean your death.

"Touch my hand, Derek. Touch it, and be blessed." I'm not too sure about this. Having no real desire to touch him at all, and no certainty that I can touch him even if I wanted to, I withhold my hand pending further evidence. Yet he simply stands and waits, and after a minute or two I

feel extremely foolish. Taking two steps forward, I take his right hand in mine. Something—some form of energy—passes through me, and then it is over. He withdraws.

Oberon has provided Derek with a gift of Stealth. In any situation in which Derek uses Stealth, for the remainder of the adventure, add 1 to his Stealth Value.

Turning away, he looks over his shoulder. "One last thing, Derek. Your friend Tom is about to awaken. He does not know of this talk. For your own sake, do not tell him. If you want his help, it is essential that he not find out." And then he disappears among the trees.

For a moment I stand lost in thought, but at last I realize we must continue on.

Turn to Section 74.

— 74 —

Eastwards we march, quickly at first, then more slowly as the forest ahead of us deepens. Slowly for two reasons: the trees are thick, and they are beautiful. We can willingly avoid neither.

Three days we have come, with few signs of any living creatures. Some white birds have alighted in the trees, and huge gray birds have leapt from the trees to form lopsided V's in the air, but we have seen nothing on the ground. The forest seems almost deserted.

My mind, too, is deserted. It takes everything I have, at times, just to remember why I have come. Oh, not the obvious reason—to find out information about my father—but rather the earlier reason, a desire to conquer Amber in his name. How I could have proceeded on that premise I'm sure I'll never know, because I can no longer see any way it could be done. This is a large place, and

it has life-forms stranger and deadlier than any I have ever known.

I can't possibly conquer the damned place. I'll be lucky just to find it.

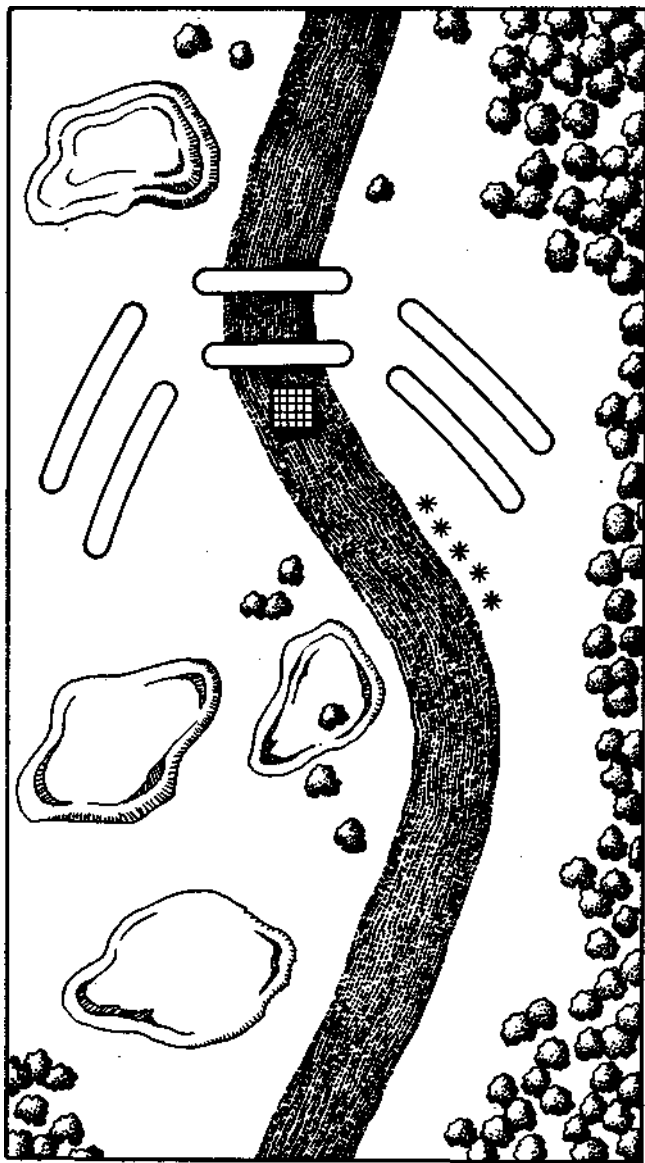
After a while, out of the east, comes the sound of battle. A real battle, not just a minor skirmish. Soft at first, but growing in intensity as we near it, the noises vary from shouts to screams, from orders barked to retreats demanded. Closer we march, and the sounds grow more particular. We hear now the clang of sword and spear, and sometimes even the twang of bows. Then the sound turns from noise to cacophony, as the din of men fighting and dying assaults our ears. We are close now, very close, and I fear to step from the forest and look.

As it turns out, leaving the forest isn't a problem. It just stops, at least for a time. Curving to the north, it forms an enormous clearing in front of us, and in that clearing, beyond the hills that obstruct our view, the battle is taking place.

To our right is the tallest hill. Climbing it, we look cautiously over the top. Our caution is unnecessary, we discover, since it is doubtful we would ever be noticed above the scene that greets us below. Our hill is higher than any in the area, perhaps a last defense for the army that is backing up towards us. From here we can see all.

Examine the map.

The lines of battle sweep across the Black Road. Closest to us, arrayed across two hills about half the height of ours, archers await an opportunity to fire. Hill 3 holds roughly twenty bowmen, while twenty-five or so stand on Hill 2. In front of them, anchoring the defenders left flank, a mix of cavalry armed with spears and swords, and foot soldiers with spikes and short swords, holds against a huge line of heavy cavalry. To their right, filling the space between the first line and the Black Road, two heavy contingents of infantry, most of them bearing spears, op-



pose each other. On the Road itself, a relatively sparse gathering of horse, bow, and sword, fights desperately against an enormous line of spear, sword, bow, and some things I cannot make out, which advances on them. Immediately across the Road two lines of infantry, the first larger than the other, defends against a long line of swordsmen and spearmen. On their right approximately twenty light cavalry are about to sweep around and roll up that flank. The defense on that flank looks hopeless. A line of caltrops guards the Road itself, but they seem to be in the wrong place.

And in the center of the Road, directly behind the middle line of horse, bow, and sword, something glows. I can't tell from here what it is, but after a few minutes it becomes obvious that the defender's entire purpose is bound up with it. The flanks give way however they must, just so that the middle will stand firm. The breach on the right, where the attackers' light cavalry threatens to break through, is suddenly highly significant.

What is clear is that the defenders are a far more appealing lot to side with. If nothing else, they look human. At least, most of them. The attackers, on the other hand, look something else. From here the ones on the Road look positively grotesque. But the Road itself may be disturbing our vision.

A horseman leaves the Black Road and rides back to Hill 2. Saying something to the archers, he wheels and gallops back into the battle. Two of the archers run down off the hill, directly towards us. With my hand I order us to fall prone, as far out of sight as possible.

"... for the caltrops," says the taller archer, his words finally audible. "They need more of them."

"Doesn't look as if it's going to do any good," the other says, fear in his voice. "They're almost through, aren't they?"

"I thought so, too," the first agrees. "But if Julian himself wants to order me to gather materials for the caltrops—and specific materials at that—then I'll gladly do it. I don't question a prince of Amber."

"But we're fighting for Caine," protests the other. "Not for Julian. Did that occur to you?"

The other stops and stares deep into his companion's eyes. "It looks now," he says at last, "that we're fighting for Amber. Julian and Caine are side by side on the Black Road, protecting the Pattern. That's the story I get. I don't know anything about it other than that. But if those two are side by side, this Pattern thing is important. That's enough for me."

Nodding, the second archer bends down and searches for materials. They pick up whatever they can find, but mostly they come up with sharp, green rocks. Dropping them into leather bags, they lope back towards the hill.

"The Pattern," muses Tom. "On the Black Road." He pauses, then adds, "Unbelievable."

"Why?" I ask.

"It's never happened before. There is more than one Pattern—" He stops and looks at me. "Or so Corwin tells us in his books, anyway. But there's never been one on the Road. It seems so perverse."

I have to agree. From what little I understood while reading Corwin's chronicles, the Black Road was something that came about by surprise. Of all the things in Amber, it was the one item that nobody had any control over. But now there is a Pattern on it, and Julian and Caine themselves, my uncles, are defending it. Whether out of fear or need, I have no idea. But I'll side with them on this. My battle is with Corwin, perhaps with Random. I have no desire to see anyone destroy my father's home.

Tom is still mumbling to himself. "A Pattern of Amber, in the middle of the Black Road of Chaos. I would never have believed it. Perhaps—"

We are interrupted. From behind us a man walks along the bottom of our hill. He is covered with a plain gray cloak that hangs to the ground. It is clasped at the throat. The cloak sports a high collar lined with red and a red trim around the sleeves. As he walks, he has his thumbs tucked into his belt.

"Derek," he calls softly. "We must talk." As simply as that. No introduction, nothing else. Stunned, and without thinking, I descend the hill to join him.

"The Pattern is essential," he says. "You must walk it."

"Me?" I almost shout. "I can't. Only a prince of Amber—"

"What do you think you are, Derek?" the man asks calmly. "You are the son of a prince of Amber, the son of a man who was, for a time, Amber's ruler. The son of a prince, Derek, is still a prince. Did you not know that?"

Actually, I'd thought about it once. In most cultures, of course, the son of a prince is indeed a prince, even though his claim to the throne is significantly less than that of his father. But I hadn't bothered with it for very long, because I had no way of knowing Amber's way of doing things. Corwin's books don't say.

"Yes," I only half lie, "I knew it. But so what? Why should I walk the Pattern?"

"You want to find Random, and, through Random, Corwin. You want to clear your father's name. You want revenge on the one you call his killer. Are these things true?"

I hesitate, then say, "Look, I don't even know you. Even if they are true, I don't see why you—"

"Look at me, Derek," he cuts in. "Look at me and tell me who I am." With those words he opens his gray cloak. Underneath, he is dressed simply, in a leather jacket, leggings, and high black boots. From his belt hang a pair of black gloves. But the belt itself is what draws my attention. It is bright red, it is closed with a ruby, and from the belt hangs a long silvery saber. When I have stopped staring, he throws back his hood to reveal an extremely handsome face set off by a blue-black beard and head of hair. He is familiar, I know, even though I have never seen him.

"Name me, Derek," he insists. "Then I will tell."

To know who this man is, you will need to have read Nine Princes in Amber. Once you decide, refer to the table

below. Beside each letter of the alphabet is a number. Spell the man's name, and beside each letter place the corresponding number. Then add up all the numbers to arrive at a total. Add 1 to this total. This final figure is the number of the section to which you should now turn. A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, D = 4, E = 5, etc.

If you are correct, continue reading from that section. The section itself will tell you if you are right. If the section you've turned to makes no sense, you are incorrect.

If you are incorrect, first recheck your addition. If still incorrect, turn to Section 71.

— 75 —

Sparks engulf my boot as I step onto the Pattern. I remember this—the sparks, the tension—from Corwin's story. I remember how, conceited fool that he is, he ranted and raved about how important he was, simply because he was a prince of Amber. Oh, sure, he was beginning to remember things, and that would have invigorated him, but the tone was still that of a braggart, little more.

My second step is harder. The Pattern exudes an indescribable sort of resistance, not a strong gravitational force but rather a sharp mental draining, almost as if it sucks out one's emotions and thoughts. This is what was happening to me now. With each step—and now I have taken my fifth—I am growing mentally fatigued.

More sparks, and now a dull throb. Not in me, not in my legs or feet or even my head, but rather in the Pattern itself. Similar to the throb of the Black Road itself, the throb of the Pattern draws away the possibility of concentration. It is necessary to concentrate on concentrating (meta-concentration? I wonder) rather than on the issue at hand.

The First Veil. Yes, I remember it now. All I need do is

step through this, and I know I am a prince of Amber. The First Veil was Corwin's first sign, and it will be mine. With great determination I lift my left foot, forcing, forcing. Forward! I scream to myself. Forward, damn it!

Suddenly I am through. I wait for a rush of sensations, a menagerie of memories to surge through me, as they did through Corwin. Nothing. Not even a whimper of recognition.

Another step, more sparks. To my waist they now rise, hot and burning. Around a curve I walk, then I whirl to my right as the Pattern swings back in upon itself. All at once another Veil rises before me, blocking my way. It is black, and it is speaking.

"Go back!" says the voice of Corwin. "The Pattern is not for you. Go back, and one of us will help you get home. You have been deceived, son of Eric. You have been led into thinking you could change things. You can't. It's that simple. You can't do anything about what happened in the past. To want to change the past is the first sign of true madness."

"Who are you to speak of madness, murderer?" I shout at the Veil. "You killed my father, but you were not deemed mad. And then you pouted your way on to and off the throne of Amber, only to leave your home and seek our Chaos itself. It was madness to do that, and it was madness that got you to Chaos in the end. Those were not hellrides, murderer, that took you the length and breadth of the First Shadow. Those were revelations of the twisted state of your own sad, evil mind." Hardly do I recognize my own voice. Someone else, surely, is saying these things for me.

"I killed Eric," the voice thunders. "But that is done. There is nothing for you here. You can't alter the past."

If Derek chooses to turn back, turn to Section 80.

If he elects to continue through the Pattern, turn to Section 86.

— 76 —

"I am sorry you could not answer," he says. "Somehow it pains me to know that. But still I may offer you some help, Derek, even though you may not know enough about this land to deserve it. Your motives are worthy, however, and for me that has usually been enough.

"Across the Black Road, deep inside a lush, green wood, stands an old house. You will stumble across it if you head straight east. The house once belonged to me, but before that and since then it has belonged to several others. Inside the house you will find, if you look hard, a way to summon, from other Shadows, brave warriors from the long dead past. Summon them, and they will help you."

"Or kill me," I mumble. I hope he hasn't heard, but he has.

"No, they will not kill you. After all is considered, they are under my control, because the house is rightly mine. They will tell you different, perhaps, but they do not speak the truth. Command them, Derek, and they can help you past many foes. You will need that help on the way to Amber.

"Now go. I have finished our visit."

Turning away, he fades into the woods. I consider his words, and then I sit back down and ponder them. For long hours I stay in that place, not bothering to wake the others out of their sleep. Even if I did, I would not be able to sleep myself.

If Derek decides to continue eastwards, turn to Section 74.

If he chooses to cross the Black Road and find the house, turn to Section 46.

— 77 —

Crossing quickly the distance between our hill and those straight ahead, we shout at the archers and tell them our plan. Hesitant at first, but fully cognizant of their need for reinforcements, they let us through without much difficulty. In a matter of minutes we find ourselves far to the left, guarding against the enemy turning the flank.

We fight hard, and we fight long, and for every man we lose we ensure that the enemy loses three. An excellent ratio, one for which to feel pride. But pride, in the end, is all we have. Our flank has held, but across the Black Road the opposite flank has crumbled. As I back out of the fray and look to my right, I see the black, gray, and brown colors of the enemy racing towards the Road. Between them and the Pattern lies nothing.

Wheeling with panic, the horsemen of Amber spur their horses away from the center and leap back towards the Pattern. Steel clashes, and shouts drown out our thoughts, as the Amberites destroy soldier after soldier. But soon the center, too, begins to collapse, and in less than two minutes all our army, from the Black Road east, ceases to exist. Our enemies now swarm over the Pattern, hacking at it, digging it up, laughing and whooping as they destroy it forever.

With our entire right side gone, we do not survive for long. Breaking for a life's run, some of our men desert towards the forest. Others, seeing the downfall perhaps of Amber itself with the destruction of the strange and unexpected Pattern, kill themselves by racing headlong into the enemy. Still others, like me and my companions, fight on until the end. But the end comes swiftly, and it comes with pain.

Turn to Section 29.

— 78 —

There are too many of them. Or perhaps there are simply not enough of us. Whichever, we are losing, and badly. The horsemen fight well, and they have survived our initial surprise.

Slowly they cut us down, one at a time, until in the end only I stand between them and the Road. The others lie dead around me, but I cannot stop to sort them out. I know only that Tom has disappeared from my side. Whether or not he has died, I have no way of knowing.

The end, when it finally comes, is swift. A sword slashes open my neck and an arrow embeds itself in my chest. I manage to cut the legs from one of their horses as I fall, but that is all. Darkness assaults.

Turn to Section 29.

— 79 —

So I survey our situation, and I realize that we could enter the battle in one of three places. The most obvious spot is straight ahead, where we could help to anchor the left flank. Obvious, but perhaps not immediately necessary. Next most obvious is to join the Amberites on the Road itself, in an attempt to prevent the Pattern from being overrun. Least obvious, least desirable, but perhaps most essential, is to cross the Black Road and help to settle the extremely brittle right flank. There our help is needed most.

If Derek opts to join the left flank (ahead), turn to Section 77.

If he chooses the center, turn to Section 81.

If he decides to cross the Black Road and join the right flank, turn to section 85.

— 80 —

Corwin is right. I can do nothing to alter the past. I want to continue, but to do so is futile.

I will turn back. Perhaps, when I reemerge from the Pattern, Julian will help me understand what has happened. But my father is dead. Trying to change that, as many have discovered throughout history, is useless. He will still be just as dead.

I turn in place and take a step. Sparks rise, over my ankle and past my knee, then across my hips and towards my chest. They have never risen this far before, and I am afraid. Then suddenly they surround me completely, my eyes burning with the flashing and the heat. Gasping for air, images of battle and the Black Road and the mountain Kolvir and the Royal Palace of Amber swirling around my head, I collapse where I stand.

When I awaken, it is morning. For a moment I do not know where I am, but then I feel a soft pillow beneath my head and a warm blanket on top of me. Around me I see the familiar trappings of my bedroom, a place I've longed for ever since sleeping my first night on the barren plains near the Black Road. Even the wallpaper with its hopelessly ugly mixture of green and gold, seems strangely lovely to me now.

Rising, I work through my morning routine of exercising and showering. After this I descend the three flights of steps to the first floor, open the door, and step out into a warm, sunny morning. A brisk walk takes me to a coffee shop, where I order a large coffee and two fresh whole-wheat doughnuts as my breakfast. Setting them in my booth, I step outside to buy a newspaper.

The Blue Jays won. Good. Jesse Barfield came up in the eighth and took Clemens over the green monster, just as I (and everyone else in Toronto) hoped he would. That makes the pennant race a little closer. One glance at the

schedule confirms that the Jays have the easier time of it. In other news, less interesting but perhaps more vital, the stock market finally halted its decline, both in Toronto and in New York and Chicago, and the arms summit seems to have made some progress. All things point upwards.

I smile. My father is dead, but I have learned what I wanted to know. Corwin was his murderer. Somehow, that is enough for me, at least for now.

For the first time in five years, I am at peace.

Turn to Section 29.

— 81 —

Fearfully and cautiously we step onto the Black Road. Together we march, one slow step after another, towards the center of the line. We feel beneath us a steady pulse drone on and on, endlessly and hypnotically, but determined as we are, the pulse does not stop us. To ignore it is to succeed, and so far we have managed to do that.

To our right now is the Pattern itself. Roughly fifteen yards wide, it takes up most of the center of the Road. Glowing a faint blue, with occasional surges of yellow, it enchants as much as it terrifies. Where it has come from, we have no idea. Where it leads, perhaps no one knows.

"Julian!" I shout to the mounted man at the back of the line. He turns to me, his dark hair sweeping across his shoulders, his enormous blue eyes showing neither surprise nor fright. His scale armor is the color of his teeth, and it is spattered with blood.

"Julian, we have come to help." When he doesn't respond, I proclaim, "I am Derek. Eric's son. Let us fight for Amber."

Finally he speaks. "There is no time for you to prove that claim," he says. "The fight goes badly. But if you would help us in our need, then I will not stand in your

way. If you are who you say you are, your sword will be of help." He smiles at me. "Now get to it, man. The enemy strikes often, and they strike very well. Step to your places, and live or die by your skill."

We do so. The battle rages all around us. Caught up in the terror and the thrill, we don't see what is happening behind us. As we kill foe after foe, each one more hideous than the last, to our rear a terrible event transpires. Julian screams, and Caine his brother wheels his horse and leaps to join him. Together they ride, with twenty others, back towards the Pattern. Knowing we will now need all the strength we can summon, because we have lost twenty of our best fighters, I stand as tall as I can and command my men to fight on. Harder they swing, but we are too few. We begin to crumble, we fall to our knees, and the enemy lumbers through. The last sight I see is the white figure of Julian, crashing onto the Black Road, his mount about to fall atop him.

Turn to Section 29.

— 82 —

To the throne, where I have unfinished business.

But first I summon my comrades to my side. All of them, even those we picked up along the way. The ones who, like me, wanted to find Random. I don't know how I called them, or how they came to me, but they are here, at the center of the Pattern. And then I decide that all is possible here, perhaps because we are not only inside the Pattern but also on the Black Road. Together, the two forces must be invincible.

In a flash we are in the throne room in the Royal Palace of Amber. On his impossibly beautiful throne sits Random himself, while arrayed to his side, battle-ready, are his personal guard.

At this point the RAL box of the stats sheet comes into play. What RAL means is Random Awareness Level. Every time Derek's men fired their guns, Random became increasingly aware of what was going on. Guns are not native to Amber, and only the power of the Black Road to alter reality allowed the guns to fire at all.

The RAL box is used to calculate the number of personal guards that stand with Random. He has, normally, two guards. For every check mark in the RAL box, add two guards. Thus, if Derek fired his guns once, there would now be four guards (the original two plus two for the shot). If Derek fired five times, he would now be faced with twelve guards. Note that Derek can no longer fire the gun.

Now, use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle. The Manpower Value of Random's forces includes Random and the number of guards you have just calculated. They have an Ordnance Value of 9. They fight on Chart A. This is a tough fight, and if Derek has not done most of what was required of him, he will almost certainly lose.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 87.

If he loses, turn to Section 88.

— 83 —

Portents and warnings. Well, there is something very basic about what a man says in agony, and I have had my doubts. Tom is always there when I need him lately. Perhaps too much so.

And perhaps most telling is my own weariness. I came here with images of conquering and revenge. Reading in

Toronto, Amber seemed a great hole in the fabric of my life, a tear that I must close or die trying. And I am not even in Amber yet, for all my striving. Did I reach too high? Ask only to go home, he said. My father. Whether I follow it or not, at least I have spoken to him.

As a result of Derek's recent decisions, increase his Ordnance Value by 1 for the remainder of the adventure. Among other things, this increase is a gift from his father. Then, turn to Section 79.

— 84 —

Yes. I must walk the Pattern. But if my father is right, I must not do so alone.

As if on cue, Julian now walks towards me. Off his horse, he looks taller than before, and I see now how strong the man truly is. His leg muscles ripple as he walks.

"I owe you thanks," he says when he reaches me. "But I don't know who you are. Will you tell me?"

A strange way to frame the question, I feel, but I answer him anyway. Within a few minutes, in fact, I tell him the entire story, everything that has happened so far. I tell all partly because I am too tired to hold back, partly because to enlist his help I need to tell him anyway. It seems so pointless to keep secrets from a prince of Amber.

"You should learn a little discretion, Derek," Julian says after I've finished. "I don't even know that much about Caine, and I see him every day. Amberites tend not to tell very much about themselves. I guess we're a bit closed." He smiles at me, then continues. "Nevertheless, you have put me in your debt, and I can think of no easier repayment than doing what you think is necessary. You need a prince of Amber to walk the Pattern with you. Will you allow me to do that for you?"

Without hesitating, I nod agreement. Julian smiles again, then turns to me and cautions, "You know, of course, that you might die in the attempt. I can't die, unless this is an unusual Pattern. That's one reason I'm so willing to help. The other reason is that I'm not sure this *is* a normal Pattern, and somebody has to find out. As far as we know, there's never been one on the Black Road before. While Caine cleans up the battlefield, I want to try the Pattern. You came along at the right time."

This whole thing seems too good to be true, and it probably is. But I have no choice. Julian is here, he is willing to help, and I need all the help I can get. Eager to get started, I step towards the Pattern.

"Take my hand, Derek," Julian says. "I don't fully know what to expect."

Together we step onto the Pattern. Immediately our boots are engulfed in a shower of sparks. In our feet we feel a deep, rhythmic pulsing, almost like a heartbeat, and we feel a steady flow of energy course through our bodies. I look at Julian, and he seems concerned.

One step, then another, a third, and finally a fourth. Now, irretrievably, we are on the Pattern. I can see nothing of the battlefield, or even of the Black Road itself. The Pattern has encompassed us.

Suddenly, before us, is a wall of blackness. The First Veil, I recognize from Corwin's narrative. Julian points to it, but I nod before he can speak. He smiles in surprise.

Leading the way now, because the Pattern seems to have narrowed, I step into the black wall. A gigantic fist seems to drive me backwards. I step again, and this time the force is lessened. Finally it allows me through, and then to my head comes the vision of Corwin, his empty eye sockets staring meaninglessly straight ahead, animals slithering and crawling around and over him, bits of rotten meat and putrid bread sitting at his side. Another step, and then I see him beginning to sense light, and I realize, with him, that his sight is now returning. With him, too, I feel joy, the joy of seeing things truly for the first time.

I see everything now through Corwin's own eyes, dark at first, then gray, then a blurry yellow, and finally the beginnings of distinct shapes, patterns, colors. A veil seems to be lifting from my eyes, and from Corwin's as well, as the world comes back into living focus. The true world this is, the world of Amber, the First Shadow and hence the only Shadow that is indisputably true. Truth, Plato's great vision and the dream of Diogenes, yawns before me now like an inviting cave.

And into that cave, fully and without hesitation, walks Corwin of Amber, true Prince of the Blood. He turns to me now and waits for me to follow. The cave is black, and it is fearful and lightless, but it lures me as nothing ever has before. Corwin turns again, and into the cave he begins to walk.

If Derek follows Corwin, turn to Section 89.

If he decides to continue the Pattern, turn to Section 91.

— 85 —

Across the Black Road we run, as quickly as it will allow us. It throbs beneath our feet and seems to raise and lower in an attempt to trip us up, but after several minutes we finally achieve the other side. We have come to the caltrops, clever but hasty obstacles of small trenches, sharp rocks, soft mud, anything to make a charging horse stumble. No one is manning them, because everyone is fighting to keep the wobbling flank from crashing to the ground.

All but ten of the light cavalry have now been engaged. Those ten are vying for position, trying to help their comrades, but the Amberites fight stubbornly and deviously to prevent the cavalry from linking up. As we run towards the line we see the ten free horses forced to back up, then go forward again, then dance beneath a flurry of arrows as

the line of Amberites waxes and wanes over a small strip of battlefield.

Into these ten we now charge. They have not expected us, and so we manage to close on them before they can turn towards us and set themselves. But even with the aid of surprise, our task is enormous. Our enemies are armed, skilled, and they do not understand fear or surrender. This one, for better or for worse, is a fight to the death.

Use the combat rules to determine the victor. Their are ten light cavalymen, with an Ordnance Value of 7, for an initial Attack Strength of 70. Derek's men have managed to close on them, which makes the cavalry's task more difficult, so the cavalymen attack on Chart C.

Derek's men attack on Chart B. Remember to add the bonuses they might have picked up during the adventure.

From this point on in the adventure, Derek's men cannot use their guns. They simply do not work this close to true Amber. This is in keeping with the original books.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 70.

If he loses, turn to Section 78.

— 86 —

"Murderer!" I shout. "I'm not about to turn back now. I've come this far, and no one has stopped me. Until I get my hands around your goddamned criminal throat, nothing will stop me ever."

Silence. The Veil says nothing more. Good. I don't need it.

I step through it. Sparks flare over my head. The throb

deepens and grows louder. I feel its pulse through every bone of my body. But now I am no longer afraid.

Another Veil, but this one barely slows me down. Then I round a corner, take two steps forward, turn back almost upon myself once more, and reach what I know to be the final Veil. Summoning all my strength, I lift my left foot and step through. It burns me, but I do not stop.

I am at the center of the Pattern of Amber. From here I can wish myself anywhere I want. And where I want, I know without hesitation, is the throne of Amber.

But first I summon my comrades to my side. All of them, even those we picked up along the way. The ones who, like me, wanted to find Random. I don't know how I called them, or how they came to me, but they are here, at the center of the Pattern. And then I decide that all is possible here, perhaps because we are not only inside the Pattern but also on the Black Road. Together, the two forces must be invincible.

In a flash we are in the throne room in the Royal Palace of Amber. On his impossibly beautiful throne sits Random himself, while arrayed to his side, battle ready, are his personal guard.

At this point, the RAL box of the stats sheet comes into play. What RAL means is Random Awareness Level. Every time Derek's men fired their guns. Random became increasingly aware of what was going on. Guns are not native to Amber, and only the power of the Black Road to alter reality allowed the guns to fire at all.

The RAL box is used to calculate the number of personal guards that stand with Random. He has, normally, two guards. For every check mark in the RAL box, add two guards. Thus, if Derek fired his guns once, there would now be four guards (the original two plus two for the shot). If Derek fired five times, he would now be faced with twelve guards. Note that Derek can no longer fire the gun.

Now, use the combat rules to determine the winner of the battle. The Manpower Value of Random's forces include Random and the number of guards you have just calculated. They have an Ordnance Value of 9. They fight on Chart A. This is a tough fight, and if Derek has not done most of what was required of him, he will almost certainly lose.

If Derek wins, turn to Section 87.

If he loses, turn to Section 88.

— 87 —

We fight well. Again and again we strike, totally forgetting that we are exhausted. We dance, and we slash, and we thrust, and we parry.

In the end I kill two guards, and for a time I face Random alone. But then my comrades, having dispatched the other guards, surround the king of Amber and force his surrender. He does not speak as we bind him in chains.

"I'll let you go, Random," I say, after explaining who I am, "as soon as you give me my answer. Where is Corwin?" Random says nothing. All he does is stare at Tom.

Over and over I command him to speak, but he refuses. I threaten him with bodily harm, with imprisonment in a rank dungeon, with everything I can think of, but he says nothing. Finally I turn away, frustrated and completely unsatisfied.

In that moment my world ends. I hear a swift movement, then a slash of a blade, and when I turn back, I see Random sprawled on the floor, facedown in a deepening pool of blood. Above him stands Tom Samuelson, gripping a sword that drips thick red drops. A gruesome smile on his face, he turns to me and announces, "It is done. I thank you, Derek."

"Who are you, Tom?" I manage to blurt out. I am trembling, but if this is the end, then I want to know.

Tom merely laughs. "You have done well at guessing names, Derek," he says. "Now guess mine." He pauses to let me look at him, and then adds, "To make your job easier, I will show you my normal dress." And he thrusts towards me a card, shiny and cool to the touch, which I take in my hand and explore.

The man in the card has jet-black hair, and his eyes are green. He straddles a white horse, on which he leans forward in the pose of the hunt, dressed in a green riding suit. He sports no beard, but his eyes show malice.

To determine who this man is, you will need to have read Nine Princes in Amber. Once you decide, refer to the table below. Beside each letter of the alphabet is a number. Spell the man's name, and beside each letter place the corresponding number. Then add up all the numbers to come up with a total. To this total add 2. This final figure is the number of the section to which you should now turn.

If you are correct, continue reading from that section. The section itself will tell you if you are right. If the section you've turned to makes no sense, you are incorrect.

If you are incorrect, first recheck your addition. If still incorrect, turn to Section 90.

CONVERSION TABLE

*A=1 B=2 C=3 D=4 E=5 F=6 G=7 H=8
I=9 J=10 K=11 L=12 M=13 N=14 O=15
P=16 Q=17 R=18 S=19 T=20 U=21 V=22
W=23 X=24 Y=25 Z=26.*

— 88 —

We fight well. Again and again we strike, totally forgetting that we are exhausted. We dance, and we slash, and we thrust, and we parry.

We do everything, in fact, except kill.

We fight well, but Random's men fight better. Led by their king, a brilliant swordsman and tireless fighter, they seem unable to do anything except win. We dance, but they dance with more grace. We slash, but they slash with more power. We thrust, but they thrust with more accuracy. We parry, but they recover.

In the end only I remain, but I cannot hold for long. I think, as I fall, that I hear Random's voice ordering his men to let me live, but his command comes far too late. I cannot see, but I know that I am cut open, and I know that my time is over.

Turn to Section 29.

— 89 —

I enter the cave. Inside I see Corwin, staring into a huge, puzzling, terrifying abyss. Joining him, I look downwards, but I see nothing but black. I look at him quizzically, but he does not return my glance.

Suddenly, from within the abyss itself, a light seeps towards me. Drawn to it like a moth to a flame, I look over the edge and down inside. There I see Tom, his sword raised above the head of a man with a golden crown on his head, and another man looking away and not seeing what goes on. And then the last man turns, and I look into my own eyes and see fear and disgust. Tom stabs, and the

king dies, and then Tom turns to me and transforms himself into someone else. That someone else, I now see, is Brand, Corwin's brother, the man whom Corwin fought throughout his Chronicles.

Corwin speaks at last. "Look down, Derek. For there you see truth."

And I see, too, the entire Chronicles of Amber come to life before my eyes, with Corwin's constantly returning memory acting as an elaborate metaphor for the problem of truth itself. I realize now, as I watch the events unfold, that the memory of a true prince of Amber is not fallible, because through his memory he creates reality. What he remembers must, by definition, have happened.

And then I see my mistake.

Corwin's account has been right all along, if for no other reason than it cannot have been wrong. Corwin is a true prince of Amber, and he cannot, by definition, lie. Whatever he has written is true, simply because he wrote it. He has created the Shadows within his Chronicles, and within his own creation he cannot deceive.

If the story had been written by my father, or by Random, or by Deirdre, or by Brand himself, it would have been a different story, and thus a different reality. But it would have been no less true, because they would have created their own version of reality. But Corwin's won out, because he was the last one to determine the nature of Amberian truth. He was the one to save the Pattern from extinction. He was the one to stop the universe from being changed. When he walked that final Pattern, he set forever the reality that we know as Amber, whatever might have happened before that did not truly happen.

And now Corwin points again towards the abyss. Looking down, I see the beautiful, strange, elaborate, frightening, wonderful Pattern of Amber. In its center is a small area perfectly round, and from it shines a light of green and blue.

"That, too, is truth," says Corwin, and with those words he turns away. I step into the abyss. I do not fall.

I have reached the center of the Black Road Pattern of Amber. From here I can go anywhere I like, merely by wishing myself there.

If Derek chooses to go to the throne room in the Palace of Amber, turn to Section 86.

If he chooses to go home, turn to Section 92.

— 90 —

I know now who he is, but then I did not. No matter. Nothing I can do now will change what has happened. My knowledge will never, I fear, become wisdom.

Because wisdom is something you have to be alive to have.

How long I have sat in this cell I do not know. It is filthy, and it is infested with rats, and things slither and leap by me in the absolute darkness. I am given little food, but I want even less. My will is gone. I don't even care what kind of creature now bites my leg. Why should I? Chained as I am, I can't do anything anyway.

I'm going to close my eyes now. Maybe, just maybe, I can sleep. And if I can sleep, I can dream. And then I can wake up and find out that all of this, from the time I started, has been nothing more than a long, drawn-out, terrifying nightmare.

Maybe. Just maybe.

Turn to Section 29.

— 91 —

Tempted as I am by Corwin's words, whether this is the real Corwin or not, I do not trust him. Julian, while offering less, somehow encourages more.

Around a corner we walk, and along a long, sweeping curve. Nothing impedes us, but we go cautiously nevertheless. Out of the corner of my right eye I think I see things moving, animals perhaps, but none of them come near, if they exist at all.

Suddenly, in the middle of our current path, another black wall rises up before us. Again each step meets with strong resistance, and only after several attempts do we stand at the barrier. Then I step through, but behind me Julian screams.

Whirling to face him, I see him wrestling with some unknown thing on the other side of the Veil. He tears at it with his hands, then draws his sword and slashes, but the only blood I see is his own. Streaming down from his forehead, it washes through his eyes and blinds him. Still he fights on, and even in the fear of the moment I admire his courage.

But then it dawns on me. Julian is fighting only himself. If I don't help him, he will kill himself. But to help him means to retrace myself, and I am afraid to do so. Once on the Pattern, to turn back is to die.

If Derek turns back to help Julian, turn to Section 93.

If he continues along the Pattern, turn to Section 94.

— 92 —

When I awake, I am lying comfortably in my bed. Under my head is a soft pillow, and covering me, a clean sheet and a fresh blanket. Looking around me, I see the familiar—and suddenly awe-inspiring—sights of my own bedroom, with every feature bringing to me a peculiar combination of joy and release. I am home.

I rise, shower, and head for the stairs. Down the three flights I bound, slowing down only when I step out into the warm morning air. Taking a couple deep breaths, I walk briskly to the coffee shop and order my breakfast—a huge coffee with two fat, sloppy, sugared-to-kill doughnuts. Self-indulgence, at times like this, is essential for life.

Picking up a newspaper from the counter, I sit in a booth and begin to read. The Blue Jays won. That's good. Barfield took Clemens over the Green Monster to pull it out, which brings the Jays one game closer. An excellent race, and one the Jays now have an honest chance of winning.

I finish my coffee and get up to leave. In the next boom a tired-looking young man in a York University sweatshirt sits reading *Nine Princes in Amber*. Smiling, I poke him on the shoulder. "Enjoying the book?" I ask, and with half-dead eyes he looks up towards me.

"Pretty good," he replies. "It's on my Fantasy course. The prof keeps insisting it's all about truth and perception and the meaning of art. He's not a bad guy, but he tends to be a bit overbearing."

"Who?" I ask, "Corwin?"

"No, no," the young man replies. "The prof. Corwin's all right. He just doesn't seem to know what's going on most of the time. And I wish he'd leave off with the paranoia trip. I mean, he thinks everyone's out to get him. I think the book needs more action."

I nod, hesitate, and then say, "It can't have more action."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a true story."

With those words, I leave the shop, the tired young student sitting puzzled and, I suspect, embarrassed. He thinks me a full-time loony, and he's probably counting his blessings that I didn't stay longer.

Truth, perception, and the meaning of art. Not bad, I think to myself. Not too bad at all. The list needs only one more element.

Truth, perception, the meaning of art. And with all these, the last of the four elements, is the saving of one's soul.

Katryna Emerson, one day I will see you again. And when I do, I will show you what it means to have a soul. Mine is intact, even if it's not quite the one I gave to you. Where yours is, my lady, I can only try to find out.

— 93 —

I can't watch him commit suicide. Not if he is unaware of what he is doing. I'm not that cruel, not that inhumane.

And so I step back through the Veil, no longer worried about what will happen. I have made my decision, and it is one I think has been right. The sparks fly wildly about me, until I can't see through them, but still I go on.

When I reach Julian, I grasp his arm and stop his swings. Exhausted and bleeding heavily, he drops to the ground. In that moment the sparks turn to flame and I feel my clothes and my hair catch fire, and as the heat penetrates to my brain, I scream in a voice out of hell.

The last thing I see, before I crumble to the ground, is Julian, Prince of Amber, fade and disappear into the blackness of the Veil.

Turn to Section 29.

— 94 —

Julian, Julian. Whatever happens, please know that I did not desert you. If I make it to the center of the Pattern, surely I can find a way to help you. It can't be much further.

Once through the Veil, in fact, I am standing directly on the center. Here, as nowhere else on the Pattern, all is calm and my head is free to think. And think I must, because the time has come to decide where to go.

If Derek decides to return and help Julian, turn to Section 80.

If Derek decides on the throne of the Royal Palace of Amber, turn to Section 86.